

# Public Health Madison & Dane County: Beach water quality monitoring and testing reduces risk of illness for people and pets

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Public Health Madison & Dane County Laboratory staff have begun to monitor conditions and test water at twenty local beaches for bacteria and blue-green algae (cyanobacteria) to determine if they are safe for recreation and swimming, and to reduce the risk of illness.

“We test water weekly at the beaches for the bacteria *E. coli* and also for blue-green algae,” says Jennifer Lavender-Braun, Microbiologist for Public Health Madison & Dane County. “If a test shows concerning results, we post signs at the beach and update our [beach website](#), indicating that people should stay out of the water,” continues Lavender-Braun.

Water quality is then checked each weekday until levels of bacteria and blue-green algae return to acceptable levels. Once levels are acceptable, signs at the beach are removed and the beach website is updated.

“There are numerous illnesses that can be transmitted via water. It’s hard to test waters for every possible type of illness-causing bacterium, so we use *E. coli* as an indicator organism. Their number indicate the likelihood of becoming ill by recreating in or consuming water at a certain concentration of bacteria,” continues Lavender-Braun.

Blue-green algae is a group of bacteria known as cyanobacteria, which can produce toxins. Contact with these toxins can cause symptoms such as stomach upset,

rashes, and respiratory irritation. Dogs that come into contact with harmful algal blooms can also get sick and sometimes die. Both people and pets should avoid being in water where harmful algal blooms are present.

“If you think there’s an algae bloom at a beach, avoid the water and call us at (608) 243-0357 so we can send someone out to check on the water quality conditions at that beach,” continues Lavender-Braun.

People are advised:

- You cannot always see or smell when water conditions are poor.
- Conditions can change quickly, and testing results may not always reflect real-time water quality.
- Swimming is not advisable after a heavy rainfall because bacteria levels in the water may be elevated.
- Harmful blue-green algal blooms may vary in their appearance, looking like an oil slick, scum, white foam, or a mat. Variations in color also occur.
- Look at water conditions before getting into the water.
- Poor beach conditions – high amounts of debris, dead fish, or murky water – may indicate elevated bacterial levels.
- Do not drink lake or river water and wash your hands before eating.
- Wash your pet after swimming.
- Obey beach postings.

Beaches are open under the current public health order. Physical distancing of six (6) feet must be maintained between individuals not from the same household or living unit. Individual gatherings at a beach need to comply with the rules regarding outdoor mass gatherings, which means that an individual group cannot be larger than 100 people, with physical distancing.

“We’re always concerned about your safety at the beach, which is why we do monitoring all summer long,” says Lavender-Braun. “While research shows that there’s an extremely low risk of getting COVID-19 from recreating in the water, people need to do more than check the water quality when they plan on coming to the beach,” continues Lavender-Braun. “There are some simple steps everyone can take to reduce their risk of COVID-19 and have fun.”

Steps include:

- Stay home if you feel at all off, or feel sick.
- Bring disinfecting wipes and hand sanitizer.
- Use the restroom before leaving home, as public restrooms may not be open.
- If you must touch common surfaces, use disinfecting wipes first, then clean hands with hand sanitizer.
- Bring a tablecloth to cover picnic tables.
- Keep 6 feet distance from people not in your household at all times.
- Wear a cloth face covering unless you are swimming.