VDH VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

Frequently Asked Questions

Virginia Department of Health (VDH)-Issued Swimming Advisories & Warnings

1. What are swimming advisories?

Swimming advisories are a method of public notification issued by VDH to advise recreational water users of health risks that may be present in natural bodies of water.

2. When are swimming advisories issued?

Swimming advisories are typically issued when water sample results exceed the Beach Action Value (BAV) for bacteria in natural waters. VDH may also issue advisories after pollution incidents such as sewer overflows, chemical spills, or major storm events.

3. Where are swimming advisories issued?

VDH collects weekly water samples at coastal public beaches in Virginia during the summer months (May – September). Advisories are issued more often in the coastal region of Virginia, due to an EPA funded Grant which supports coastal monitoring efforts. Advisories may also be issued throughout the Commonwealth should the public health need arises.

4. Why are swimming advisories issued?

VDH issues swimming advisories based on Virginia's BAV. When beach samples exceed the BAV, it means people are more likely to experience illness when exposed to natural waters. Virginia uses 104 MPN/100ml of water as the BAV for *Enterococci* in saltwater and transition zones. EPA recommends a BAV of 235 cfu/100 ml of water for *E. coli* in freshwater.

5. What type of testing is performed for swimming advisories?

VDH tests water samples for *Enterococci* bacteria in saltwater and transition zones using EPA-approved methods. These bacteria serve as indicator organisms for fecal pollution of natural freshwaters. They are not harmful themselves, but indicate that other potentially harmful organisms (such as other bacteria, viruses, and protozoans) may be present.

6. How will people know if a swimming advisory is in effect?

Several public notification methods may be used by VDH to issue a swimming advisory, including:

- Posting an advisory sign in plain view at the swimming location access point;
- Issuing a local press release;
- Publishing swimming advisories at coastal public beaches on the VDH Beach Map: (https://www.vdh.virginia.gov/waterborne-hazards-control/swimming-advisories-and-monitored-beaches-map/);
- Informing and local government officials via email;
- Providing additional information as requested.

7. Can people still swim if a swimming advisory is issued?

Though it is not recommended to swim, VDH swimming advisories do not prohibit people from swimming in natural waters. Swimming advisories are intended to notify recreational water users that swimming is not recommended due to elevated levels of bacteria. Some localities have local ordinances that prohibit swimming when a VDH swimming advisory is in effect.

8. When are swimming advisories lifted?

VDH swimming advisories are lifted when additional sampling demonstrates that results are below the BAV for bacteria.

9. When are warnings issued for a swimming beach?

When VDH staff are unable to collect bacteria samples for any reason on a normal sampling day during beach season, a warning will be issued for the beach to alert the public that bacteria results are not available for that date. Reasons why staff would be unable to sample would be unsafe sampling conditions due to storm events, municipal beach closure due to dredging, for example.

10. When would VDH lift a warning for a swimming beach?

VDH will lift a warning for a swimming beach as soon as bacteria sample results are available during the next scheduled sampling event.

11. What is a VDH closure of waters and can people swim if issued?

VDH may issue a closure of natural bodies of water due to current water conditions or a recent incident. VDH closures are ordered by the State Health Commissioner (or designee) and may prohibit activities such as swimming, wading, or fishing. VDH closures are rarely ordered by the State Health Commissioner, and are only issued when conditions pose a present an imminent threat to public health, such as toxic substances or harmful algal blooms.

12. What are the most common types of recreational water illnesses?

The most common recreational water illnesses are gastrointestinal and may cause vomiting, diarrhea, nausea, abdominal pain or fever. These illnesses result from swallowing water contaminated by disease-causing organisms. Contact with contaminated water can also cause upper respiratory (ear, nose and throat), and wound infections.

13. Who is most at risk of recreational water illnesses?

Certain groups such as children, the elderly, and those with a weakened immune system are particularly vulnerable to recreational water illnesses.

For additional information, please Contact Us.