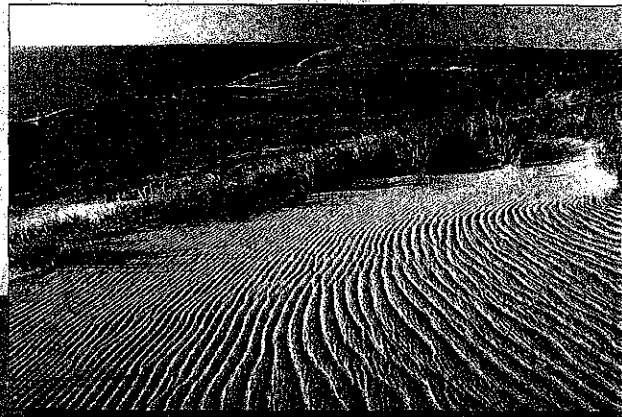




# Protecting Our Beaches

***Learn what EPA is doing  
to protect public health at beaches  
and how you can get involved.***



## ***Is the Water at Your Beach Safe?***

Each year there are hundreds of beach advisories and closings at coastal and Great Lakes beaches due to disease-causing microorganisms. Many beaches that are not issued advisories or closings might also be polluted, but if the water isn't monitored, you won't know whether you run the risk of getting sick. Through the Beaches Environmental Assessment and Coastal Health (BEACH) Program, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is working with state, tribal, and local government partners to make sure you have beach water quality information before you swim.

If you swim in polluted water, you can get minor illnesses like sore throats or diarrhea. You might also get more serious illnesses such as hepatitis, meningitis, encephalitis, or severe gastroenteritis. Children, the elderly, and people with weakened immune systems have a greater chance of getting sick when they come into contact with contaminated water.



## Grants

The BEACH Act authorizes EPA to award grants to eligible coastal and Great Lakes states to help state, tribal, and local governments develop and implement their beach monitoring and public notification programs.

- In 2001 and 2002 EPA awarded \$12 million in grants to states to develop programs to monitor water quality at beaches and to notify the public when water quality problems occur.
- In 2003 EPA is awarding \$9.9 million in implementation grants.
- Grants are awarded to states using an allocation formula based on three factors: length of swimming season, total shoreline miles, and 2000 census population data.
- In 2004 EPA expects to continue awarding grants to states to support their beach monitoring and notification programs.
- States receiving grants will be required to submit beach water quality monitoring and notification data to EPA. To make data submission easier, EPA is creating a new database to store beach monitoring and notification data and display the data on the Internet.
- You can find more information on BEACH Act Grants at [www.epa.gov/waterscience/beaches/grants](http://www.epa.gov/waterscience/beaches/grants).

## Guidance

EPA published the *National Beach Guidance and Required Performance Criteria for Grants* in July 2002. The guidance lists the performance criteria that eligible applicants must meet to receive grants to implement beach water monitoring and public notification programs under the BEACH Act. This guidance is also a reference on assessing beach health risks and designing water sampling programs.

## What Is EPA Doing?

EPA created the BEACH Program in 1997 to reduce the risk through improvements in recreational water monitoring, pollution control, and public notification. In 2000, EPA passed the BEACH Act. The BEACH Act establishes requirements for state and local governments for beach monitoring and public notification, public notification, and water quality monitoring data.

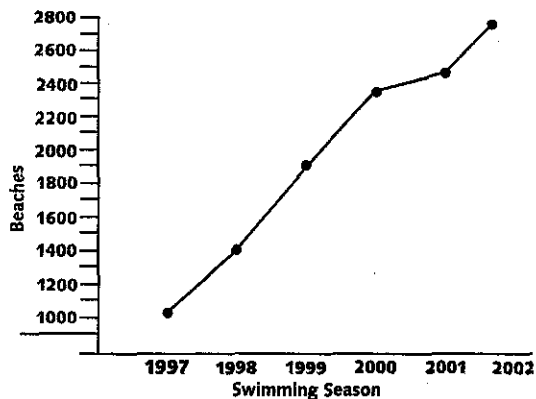
## Water Quality Standards

EPA encourages states and tribes to use the Agency's published Bacteria Criteria for Recreational Waters which recommends the use of *E. coli* and enterococci as indicators of fecal contamination. Although some states currently use fecal coliform or total coliform as indicators, the BEACH Act requires coastal and Great Lakes states to adopt EPA's recommended indicators in their water quality standards by April 2004. Currently, 17 of 35 states have adopted the published water quality criteria.

## Survey

Each year, through the National Health Protection Survey of Beaches (NHPSB), state and local agencies voluntarily submit information to EPA on their beach monitoring and public notification programs. During the 2002 swimming season, NHPSB revealed that out of 2,823 beaches surveyed, 709 were affected by one or more advisories or closings. The survey is a national inventory of swimming beaches, monitoring agencies, and recreational water quality standards. It documents the water quality standards, monitoring methods, and procedures agencies use to issue beach advisories and closings.

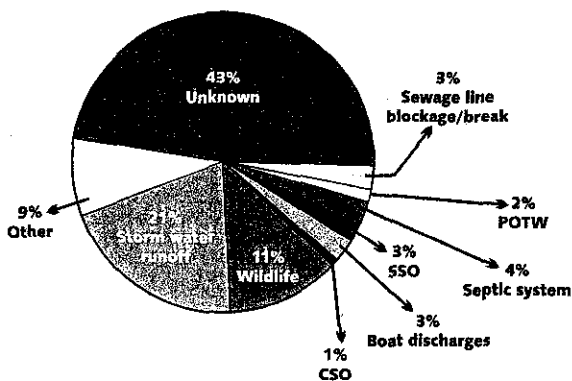
- The number of beaches covered in the survey increased from 1,021 in 1997 to 2,823 in 2002. The number of agencies participating increased from 159 to 227 in the same period.
- You can find survey information about individual beaches on the BEACH Watch Web site at <http://yosemite.epa.gov/water/beach2003.nsf>.



Number of Beaches Reporting from 1997 to 2002

k of illness to users of the Nation's recreational waters  
n control, risk assessment, and communication. Congress  
requirements for EPA to award grants to states and local  
h monitoring and notification guidance, and collect beach

- The survey respondents reported that in many cases, the source of pollution resulting in beach advisories and closings is unknown. The identified sources of beach water pollution are storm water runoff, wildlife, sewage overflows, boating wastes, and leaking septic systems.



Sources of Pollution That Resulted in Advisories and Closings in 2002

## Research

Current bacteria indicator methods require 24 hours before the results are known. EPA is developing new and faster methods to detect pathogens and pathogen indicators of fecal contamination. New methods developed by EPA will be evaluated in epidemiological studies to develop better understanding of the link between exposure to high bacteria levels and health effects. Because there can be a large amount of variability in measuring bacteria levels in water, EPA is conducting studies to measure temporal and spatial variation of bacteria. This will help states design a better sampling program.

*The latest National Health Protection Survey of Beaches revealed that out of 2,823 beaches surveyed last year, 709 beaches were affected by one or more advisories or closings.*

## What Can You Do to Protect Your Health at the Beach?

*You can do two things to protect your family's health at the beach—get informed and get involved!*

### ★ Get informed:

- Visit EPA's Beach Watch Web site at [www.epa.gov/waterscience/beaches](http://www.epa.gov/waterscience/beaches)! You can find out whether a specific beach is being monitored, who performs the monitoring, for what pollutants they monitor, and if any beach advisories or closings have been issued.
- Learn about the health of your local beach! Contact your state, tribal, or local health or environmental protection office to find out if and when the water at your beach is monitored, who performs the monitoring, and where the results are posted.
- Learn about the sources of water pollution! Most beach pollution comes from activities upstream, so it is important for you to know about pollutants entering the water from many different locations. EPA's Surf Your Watershed Web site ([www.epa.gov/surf](http://www.epa.gov/surf)) will help you find out about pollutants and sources that affect the water at your beach.

### ★ Get involved:

There are many ways you can get involved in protecting and preserving water quality at our Nation's beaches. Here are just a few:

- Join! Getting involved in a local clean-up effort is a great way to help federal, state, and local officials protect your health when you swim at the beach. Chances are you can join a group or organization that's already working to protect beach water quality. Find out which groups are active in your area by visiting EPA's Adopt Your Watershed Web site at [www.epa.gov/adopt](http://www.epa.gov/adopt).
- Volunteer! Become a volunteer water quality monitor and learn about water quality issues while helping to protect the Nation's water resources. Find out more at [www.epa.gov/owow/monitoring/vol.html](http://www.epa.gov/owow/monitoring/vol.html).
- Protect water quality at home! The best way to reduce beach water pollution is through watershed-based pollution prevention. Many of these efforts require major activities by states, counties, or municipalities to improve sewage treatment plants and keep untreated sewage out of the water.
- Prevent beach water pollution! Conserving water, keeping septic systems properly maintained, disposing of boat sewage at onshore pumpout facilities, picking up after pets, and keeping storm drains clean can all make a difference. Visit [www.epa.gov/water/yearofcleanwater/top\\_things.html](http://www.epa.gov/water/yearofcleanwater/top_things.html) to learn about other things you can do to protect your coastal watershed.

## *What Can You Do to Avoid Getting Sick at the Beach?*

- Find out what beaches are monitored regularly and posted for closures or swimming advisories by visiting the BEACH Watch Web site at [www.epa.gov/waterscience/beaches](http://www.epa.gov/waterscience/beaches).
- Avoid swimming at beaches with visible discharge pipes or at urban beaches within 24 hours after a heavy rainfall.



### **For More Information**

For more information about water quality at your beach, contact your local or state health or environmental protection department. You can find the telephone number in the blue section of your local telephone directory.

You may also contact:



**U.S. Environmental Protection Agency**  
Office of Water  
BEACH Program (4305T)  
1200 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20460

**EPA-823-R-03-009**

[www.epa.gov/waterscience/beaches](http://www.epa.gov/waterscience/beaches)

email: [ost-beaches@epa.gov](mailto:ost-beaches@epa.gov)



Cover photo:  
Beach landscape, Robert De Jonge, courtesy Michigan Travel Bureau