

Is it safe to go in the water and to eat the crabs?



This time of year, people ask the simple question, “Is it safe to go into the water?” Unfortunately, the answer isn’t simple.

The main public health risk from swimming and water contact is infection from water-borne bacteria.

The most common type of infection comes from fecal bacteria in the water from human and animal waste.

When bacteria infect a healthy adult, the person usually suffers gastrointestinal symptoms, but the infection isn’t life-threatening. People with impaired immune systems and some other diseases may suffer more severe consequences.

The Anne Arundel County Health Department conducts a bacterial testing program for public beaches. They test for Enterococci bacteria, which is considered the best indicator of fecal contamination of water. Their sites may be tested weekly, biweekly, or monthly, depending on the county’s estimate of how many people swim at the site.

You can find results of their testing program and sign up for water quality e-mail alerts at the Health Department’s web site: <http://www.aahealth.org/wqemail.asp>.

West/Rhode Riverkeeper conducts our own Enterococci testing program during the swimming season. We test some sites not tested by the county, and all of our sites are tested weekly. We sample every Wednesday morning between Memorial Day and Labor Day. We usually get the results back on Thursday or Friday and post them on the web site on Friday:

<http://www.westrhoderiverkeeper.org/index.php/programs/water-quality-monitoring/bacteria-results.html>.

The standard set by the Environmental Protection Agency for heavily used beaches

PROTECT YOURSELF FROM INFECTION FROM WATER CONTACT

- Don’t swim after a rainstorm. The general rule is to wait 48 hours after a storm, but the bigger the storm, the longer you should stay out of the water.
- Wash off with warm water and soap when you come out of the river or the Bay.
- Don’t swim where there are posted beach closings or advisories.
- Don’t swim if you have open cuts, sores, or scratches.
- Don’t swim in water that is very warm (mid 80s) or water that looks polluted, such as with trash, algae, or a film on the surface.
- If you have an impaired immune system or disease, check with your doctor about swimming in the Bay.
- If you notice a particularly red, swollen or blistered skin infection after swimming in bay water, seek qualified medical help immediately.
- If you develop gastrointestinal disease symptoms after swimming in the Bay or eating shellfish, seek medical attention.

is 104 colonies of bacteria or less per 100 milliliters of water. For beaches used by fewer people (community beaches, for example), the EPA standard is 158 colonies or less per 100 milliliters of water.

Because bacteria levels can change quickly and dramatically, current results can’t necessarily predict levels for the immediate future. Frequent high levels can indicate a steady source of contamination. High bacteria levels after a storm generally dissipate after two or three days.

Bacteria enters our rivers from multiple sources. Failing [septic systems](#), sewer leaks, [untreated boat waste](#), and pet/wildlife feces are all potential sources. During heavy rainfall, bacteria can be in the runoff that goes into the rivers. The threat of bacteria after a rainfall is so great that the Health Department issues a preemptive no-swimming advisory for 48 hours following any rainfall of at least one inch.

Eating contaminated seafood also can present serious health risks.

Most fish caught in local waters contain some level of mercury, and some may contain PCBs. The State of Maryland publishes consumption advisories that indicate the maximum amounts that should be consumed, with separate recommendations for women and children.

You can view those recommendations at: <http://www.mde.maryland.gov/citizensinfocenter/fishandshellfish/index.asp>. The site also recommends avoiding consumption of the “mustard” from crabs caught in certain areas because of potential concentrations of PCBs.

Handling fish and crabs can also involve the risk of infections. Be careful not to handle fish if you have cuts; wear gloves to avoid getting cuts; and wash your hands thoroughly after handling fish.

Eating raw shellfish also presents the potential risk of bacterial infections. Those risks are dramatically reduced by thorough cooking. If you are going to eat raw shellfish, make sure you know where it came from and that it has been handled properly. People with impaired immune systems should never eat raw shellfish.

Unfortunately, swimming and eating seafood are no longer carefree activities.

Both can be enjoyed safely, as long as you take the above advice into consideration.

It’s sad that this is the case, but it’s why we are working so hard to try to make things better.