

Is it Safe to Swim in the Willamette River in Portland?

DEQ monitors bacteria

The Willamette River in Portland is safe for swimming and other recreational uses at most times of the year.

DEQ monitors water quality monthly at the Hawthorne Bridge in downtown Portland. Monitoring during the past decade shows that fewer than three percent of water samples contained unhealthy bacteria levels. Exposure to bacteria is the greatest health concern for people swimming in the river.

Historically, high bacteria concentrations in the Willamette River were due largely to overflows from municipal combined sewers. Combined sewers capture runoff from city streets and divert this water into the sewer line. Because the sewer system now handles a much larger volume of wastewater than the original designers anticipated, heavy rainfall causes sewer overflows.

The Willamette River's last violation of health standards for water quality occurred in December 2009 following a period of winter rainfall. It can take as little as a tenth of an inch of rain before a combined sewer overflow occurs. While this may not result in unhealthy levels of bacteria, Oregon Health Authority/Public Health and DEQ recommend that anyone considering swimming in the Portland area first consult the [Portland River Alert Program](#) for current advisories:

<http://www.portlandonline.com/bes/index.cfm?a=349045&c=36989>

Portland reduces sewer overflows

The City of Portland is addressing the combined sewer overflow problem. Portland has installed pipes that separate stormwater from sewage and sumps which allow runoff to percolate into the soil. Disconnected downspouts, swales and green street projects also have diverted stormwater from entering the sewer system. These efforts, as well as improved agricultural practices and pet waste pick up, have reduced the levels of bacteria and frequency of violations.



Willamette River in downtown Portland

How to reduce exposure to contaminants

While generally it is considered safe to swim in the Willamette River, the Oregon Health Authority gives the following hygiene recommendations to reduce exposure to a variety of contaminants including bacteria:

- Avoid swimming after a heavy rainfall.
- Avoid swallowing river water while swimming.
- Wash hands before eating and shower after swimming to wash off river water.
- Avoid swimming in cloudy water.

For more information

Contact DEQ Lower Willamette River Basin coordinator Doug Drake at 503-229-5350 or drake.doug@deq.state.or.us.

For more information about recreational water illnesses go to

<http://www.cdc.gov/healthySwimming/where.htm>.

Alternative formats

Alternative formats of this document can be made available. For more information call 503-229-5696, Portland, or call toll-free in Oregon at 1-800-452-4011, ext. 5696. Hearing-impaired persons may call 711.



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