

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 waste water than the original designers anticipated, heavy rainfall causes sewer overflows.

The Willamette River's last violation of health standards for water quality occurred in November 2005 following a period of heavy rainfall. It takes more than an inch of rain in a two to four day period before unhealthy levels of bacteria are likely to occur from sewer overflows. The seven other Willamette River sampling stations from Portland to Eugene show similar results.

Portland reduces sewer overflows

The City of Portland is actively addressing the combined sewer overflow problem. Portland has installed pipes that separate storm water from sewage and sumps which allow runoff to percolate into the soil. Disconnected downspouts, swales and green street projects also have diverted storm water 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 the frequency of violations.

How to reduce exposure to contaminants

Because combined sewer overflows and other sources of bacteria have not been totally eliminated, people should follow health advisories posted for the river by the Oregon Public Health Division. Avoid swimming after a heavy rainfall.



Willamette River in downtown Portland

For health advisories go to

<http://www.oregon.gov/DHS/ph/healthnews.shtml>

While it is generally considered safe to swim in the Willamette River, the Oregon Public Health Division and DEQ recommend that people avoid swallowing river water while swimming. After swimming it is advisable to wash hands before eating. It is also advisable to shower after swimming to wash off river water. In general, people should avoid swimming in cloudy water. These hygiene recommendations can reduce exposure to a variety of contaminants including bacteria.

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 (Braille, large type) of this document can be made available. Contact the DEQ Office of Communications & Outreach, Portland, at (503) 229-5696, or toll-free in Oregon at 1-800-452-4011, ext. 5696.



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