

FAQ's ABOUT THE MISSISSIPPI BEACH MONITORING PROGRAM

What does it mean when an advisory is posted for a beach? Is the water safe for swimming? An advisory is issued when bacteria levels exceed water quality criteria and therefore poses an increased risk to human health. Under the Mississippi Beach Monitoring Program, water is tested for the presence of *Enterococcus* bacteria, which is an indicator for bacteria pollution. When an advisory is issued, water contact should be avoided.

Does the program monitor for *Vibrio* or “flesh eating” bacteria?

Many different types of bacteria can cause what is commonly referred to as “flesh eating” bacteria. These bacteria multiply in the warmer water temperatures and tend to reach peak levels during summer months, so higher bacteria numbers coincide with water contact activities. Most at risk are people with a weakened immune system, those who suffer from chronic liver disease, and those with an open cut or wound.

Unlike monitoring for fecal coliforms associated with sewage discharges, MDEQ does not monitor specifically for *Vibrio* bacteria because these types of bacteria exist naturally and can be found in marine (salt) and estuarine (brackish) waters and are not specific to pollution sources.

How Can You Prevent *Vibrio* Infection?

The only way to prevent infection is to avoid contact with the water. However, the incidence of infection from swimming and other recreational activities in Mississippi waters is relatively rare.

When water contact cannot be avoided:

- Cover wounds with water proof bandages
- Carry hand sanitizer to swimming areas and when fishing or crabbing so that wounds that occur can be cleansed immediately or have ready access to soap and water
- Wear water shoes to avoid cuts and scrapes
- Always shower following swimming in natural waters and wash hands before handling food or eating.

You can find out more information about *Vibrio* bacteria from the Mississippi State Department of Health at: http://msdh.ms.gov/msdhsite/_static/14,0,345.html.

Can I still use the beaches that are under advisory?

MDEQ strongly recommends no water contact during an advisory for the segment of beach for that monitoring station. The public can still enjoy the sand portion of the beach section under advisory, but it is “swim at your own risk” if you chose to come in contact with the water.

How long does an advisory last?

When samples indicate that bacteria levels are high enough to trigger an advisory, the water at that beach will be resampled every 24 hours until levels fall within a safe range. An advisory lasts at least 24 hours but can be extended until bacteria levels come back down to levels that no longer pose a risk to human health.

Where does this contamination come from?

The bacteria in the coastal waters can come from a variety of sources—both near the shore and inland. They include storm water runoff, boating waste, sewer overflows, wildlife, and other human activities. Elevated levels of bacteria are also associated with strong winds, which stir up sediments, and rain events. Additionally, swimmers are reminded that **the Beach Task Force has a standing recommendation that swimming not occur during or within 24 hours of a significant rainfall event.**

What is the difference between an advisory and a closure at a beach?

A closure is issued for a section of beach where there is a known source of pollution that poses a risk to human health. For example, a sewage line breaks near a beach monitoring

station and raises the bacteria levels too high for human contact. An advisory is usually issued due to more natural reasons that can cause high levels of bacteria.

What is the health risks associated with water contact at a section of beach under advisory/closure? Can I reduce my health risk?

People who come in contact with water contaminated with such bacterial pollution, as indicated by *Enterococcus* bacteria, are at an increased risk of becoming ill. Pathogens associated with this type of pollution can cause ear, eye, skin and respiratory infections, gastrointestinal illness, and more serious diseases such as meningitis and hepatitis. Members of the public that are at the most risk to such illness are the very young, seniors, and people with compromised immune systems. Also, open cuts or sores are more prone to get an infection. **It should be understood that all natural bodies of water pose some risk.** You can limit the risk by keeping your head above water and not ingesting any saltwater while swimming. It is also a good practice to shower after swimming.

How can I find out about advisories?

On behalf of the Beach Monitoring Task Force, MDEQ sends press releases to local media to alert the public, signs are posted at the sampling locations, and a website is maintained with current information about which sites are under an advisory and which are not (<http://www.usm.edu/gcrl/msbeach/index.cgi>). To receive beach advisories directly, send an email to rwilbur@mdeq.ms.gov for inclusion in a public group email list, text "MDEQbeach" to 95577, or follow MDEQ on Twitter: @MDEQ.