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David Coates / The Detroit News

Kids were limited to playing in the sand at Veterans Memorial Park in St. Clair Shores last week when the beach was closed. It has since reopened.

Great Lakes lead nation in beach closings

Pollution makes swimmers wary of water, risks health

By Brad Heath / *The Detroit News*

ST. CLAIR SHORES --

For those who live and play along the Great Lakes, signs like the ones up early this week at Veterans Memorial Park -- "Beaches closed by Health Dept." -- can be a familiar sight.

A higher percentage of beaches along the Great Lakes are closed each year by pollution than on any other U.S. coastline, federal environmental records show. Nearly a quarter of the lakes' beaches closed at least once last year, usually because of bacteria levels high enough to make people sick.

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The closings, environmentalists say, show that despite years of attempts to clean up our beaches and improve the quality of our water, plenty of work remains.

"Why are we letting our kids swim in sewage?" said Kidd Dorn, a spokesman for the Natural Resources Defense Council, which studies beach pollution.

It's hard to pin down why closings are more widespread in the Great Lakes than elsewhere. Experts say it ties back to rampant pollution, currents that can circulate dirty water near shore and frequent monitoring more apt to detect problems.

Whatever the causes, the concern is widespread.

Even when beaches are open, many residents of lakeside communities say they're wary of the water. On the blistering Tuesday afternoon when Macomb County lifted its warning at Memorial Beach in St. Clair Shores, children splashed in a man-made water park, cooling off as their parents watched from the shade. But the beach was empty.

Linda Lisak is among those who stayed away. She grew up swimming in Lake St. Clair, but those days are over. "I grew up in that lake," she said. "But when you hear words like 'raw sewage,' I don't want to take that chance," Lisak said.

Officials in St. Clair Shores and around the Great Lakes insist their beaches are safe. Beaches usually stay shut only for



Brandy Baker / The Detroit News

Charmaine Butler, 11, buries Jamison Demond, 9, in the sand at Harrison Township's Metro Beach, which is among those frequently closed because of high levels of bacteria.

When beaches are closed

► **Standards:** Most Michigan health agencies close beaches when the concentration of E. coli in the water exceeds safe levels. The tests also serve as a barometer for the presence of other bacteria. To be safe, weekly samples and the 30-day average must fall below safety thresholds.

► **Other states:** Most states use similar bacteria tests to determine if water is safe, though some monitor different bacteria or use different limits on the concentration of bacteria needed to close a beach. All states are supposed to adopt generally similar standards by next year.

► **Frequency:** Each local health department sets its own sampling schedule, though the federal government recommends it be done at least once a week. Some agencies check water quality daily; others don't test it at all.

► **Health risks:** Studies show swimming in water with high concentrations of bacteria increases the risk of illness. The most common illness is gastroenteritis, though

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a few days before monitors clear them to re-open. And the threshold for shutting a beach -- based on the concentration of harmful bacteria in the water -- is low enough that the health risks are small.

"You can never totally eliminate the risk of swimming in any body of water. But when we know the water meets our standards, the risk is very, very low," said Gary White, Macomb County's associate environmental health director.

Those standards were breached at 23 percent of the 382 beaches along the Great Lakes last year, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency records show. That's substantially higher than the 14 percent of beaches ordered closed along the Atlantic and Pacific coasts.

The EPA survey also shows Great Lakes beaches close more often than inland lakes and rivers, though the government's data on those waterways are less thorough.

Pollution sources elusive

The findings are based on a yearly EPA survey of the patchwork of public health agencies responsible for monitoring the quality of water at the nation's beaches. Though focused mainly on coastal areas, the survey's findings offer the most detailed picture possible of the environmental threats facing America's beaches.

The closing rates at Great Lakes beaches have increased slightly since 1999, though experts say it's impossible to know whether that reflects dirtier water or tighter monitoring. And not all the news for Great Lakes beaches is bad: Closings here tend to be shorter than on other coastlines, so swimmers don't always have to wait as long to get back in the water.

To monitor water problems, most health agencies -- in the Great Lakes and elsewhere -- check their beaches weekly for unsafe concentrations of bacteria like E. coli. Others test less frequently. Almost all water is contaminated to some degree by E. coli or similar bacteria, but high concentrations can put swimmers at an increased risk of stomach illnesses or other diseases.

Figuring out that water is dirty usually proves far simpler than figuring out what befouled it. Officials know some pollution is washed into the water by heavy rains and some overflows from sewage treatment facilities. Some seeps out from drains in people's houses or aging septic tanks. Some comes from bird feces.

Most of the time, it's impossible to tie a high bacteria level to a single source.

When Memorial Beach shut last week because of high E. coli levels, for instance, officials theorized heavy rains were to blame. But White said officials don't know for sure what the rain washed into the water.

Even after the beach reopened Tuesday, St. Clair Shores resident Carolyn

risks for contracting some other illnesses also increase.

Sources: Michigan Department of Environmental Quality, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

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Steele didn't go in the water. Neither did her two grandchildren.

"I know it's open, but it wasn't the last time we were here, but why take chances?" she said.

"Plus," she added, "it had a bad odor."

National concern

Complaints about closed beaches in Metro Detroit are nothing new. Such problems with unsafe swimming water stretch from Los Angeles to Florida and Maine, touching almost every stretch of U.S. coastline and many of the nation's inland lakes and rivers.

To battle that problem, the scattering of local health and environmental agencies responsible for keeping the water safe have begun sampling the water at beaches more frequently. Many have lowered their threshold for posting advisories warning swimmers to stay away. Meanwhile, the federal government has tightened its rules for what cities, homeowners and industry can dump into the water, requiring, among other steps, new controls on storm water.

Under a 1990 federal law, states must adopt EPA standards for water safety by next year. The EPA also doles out money to states to help carry the cost of improved water monitoring. This year, the government devoted \$10 million to the job, including \$283,000 in Michigan.

But water at many beaches remains unhealthy -- at least periodically.

"You'll never be able to completely shut off the pollution," said Peter Coppola, an associate sanitarian for the Erie County Health Department in New York, which monitors beaches near Buffalo. "Sometimes, the water gets dirty. But a lot of times, we test the water and the quality approaches that of drinking water."

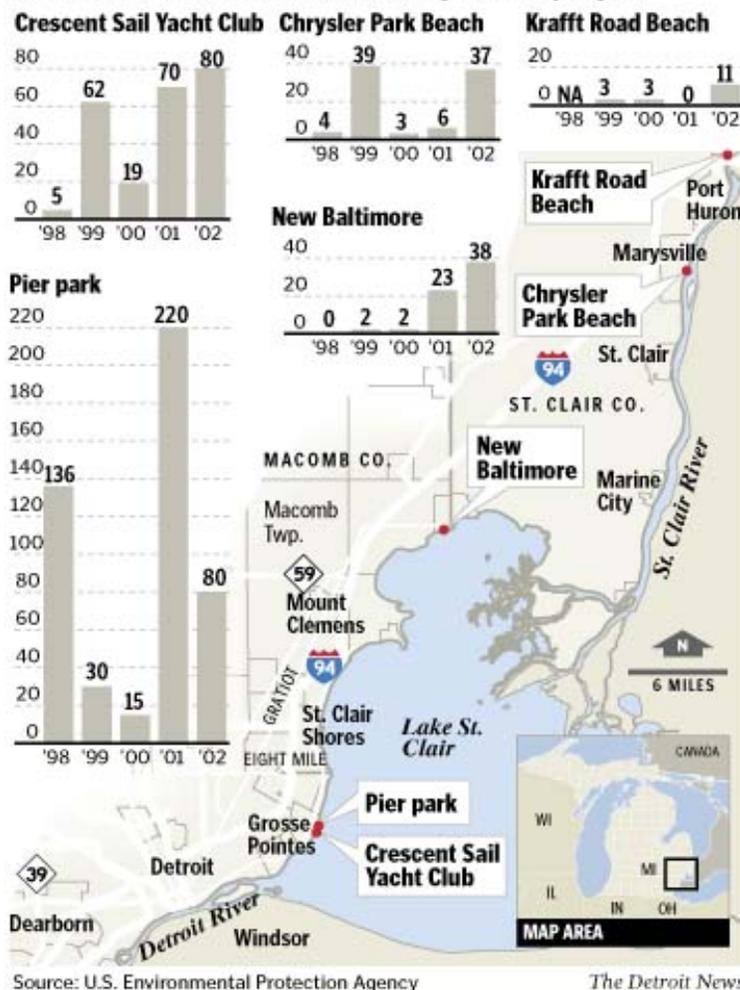
Water quality monitoring still varies widely, despite the federal push for closer scrutiny. Many public health agencies in Michigan sample their beaches at least once a week; others don't sample them at all, according to a Natural Resources Defense Council report.

In Michigan, the Department of Environmental Quality sets the standards for when a beach should be shut and when it should be reopened based on concentrations of bacteria. It requires agencies that monitor water to test at least five times every 30 days.

But state law puts the burden for conducting the checks on local health agencies, which can still opt not to test the water at all.

Michigan's most-closed beaches

Five beaches in Southeast Michigan were shut more often by pollution last year than any others in the state. Below are the beaches and the number of days closed per year.



Searching for source

To Mark Dorfman, knowing when a beach is dirty is only half the battle. The other half is figuring out why and how to shut off the pollution, something many public health agencies still make little attempt to do.

"With dirty water, the more you look, the more you find," said Dorfman, a Natural Resources Defense Council researcher who studies beach contamination. "The next step is to really get a handle on what's going on and where it's coming from."

Some health agencies do that. Macomb County health officials, for instance, routinely check for illegal hookups into county drains, where everything from back yard runoff to untreated sewage can pour into the water. In parts of Northern Michigan, officials have tracked down problems with birds and contaminated water runoff.

"We're a tourist community and we rely heavily on our waters," said Scott Kendzierski, who coordinates the beach monitoring program for the Northwest Michigan Community Health Agency, covering Antrim, Charlevoix, Emmet and Otsego counties. "People come from all over the world to enjoy what we have, so we need to make sure they have a good experience."

Other agencies don't take such steps.

Last year, pollution shut both of the Great Lakes beaches monitored by Wayne County -- at Pier Park and the Crescent Sail Yacht Club in Grosse Pointe Farms -- for most of the summer. Officials admit they don't know what caused the contamination, which records show has been a problem at both beaches for several years.

"We don't know why it's persistent," said Steve Tackitt, the county's environmental health director. "With so many pipes, the winds, the currents, there are just so many factors that go into it."

In Chicago, 22 of the city's 33 beaches were shut at least once last year. They didn't look for the source of the pollution or make an attempt to stop it.

"I don't think there's anything we can do to change nature," parks spokeswoman Katherine McGuire said. "All we can do is test to make sure it's safe to swim in and keep the public informed."

How beach contamination occurs

Most beach closings are based on tests for elevated bacteria from human or animal wastes that exceed beach water quality standards. Here are some ways contamination occurs:

Septic systems

Underground septic systems, if not properly sited, built and maintained, can leach wastewater into coastal recreational waters.

Waterfowl

When waterfowl such as Canada geese make their home on beaches, their fecal matter can overload the beach, degrading the water.

Conditions

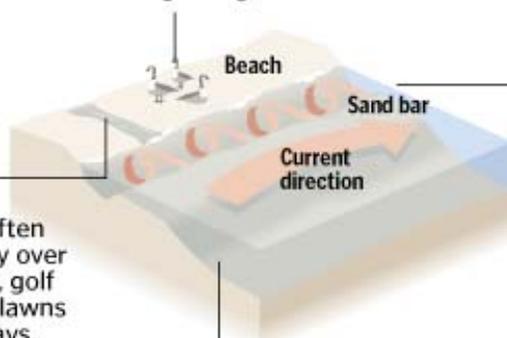
Contamination occurs near the shore. Waves containing bacteria can be trapped against the shore by sand bars. The water stagnates, contaminating the swimming area. Factors such as wind, waves and current, as well as ultraviolet light from the sun may help reduce bacteria levels. The time needed to reduce bacteria is 48 hours.

Polluted runoff

Rain water often flows directly over farms, roads, golf courses and lawns into waterways. Runoff may contain animal waste, fertilizers and pesticides that can foul beaches.

Sewer overflow

Sanitary sewers can become overloaded, especially when it rains, and discharge raw sewage into waterways.



Source: National Resources Defense Council

Tim Summers / The Detroit News

Where beaches close

More beaches are closed by pollution along the Great Lakes than in other parts of the United States.

	Total number of beaches	Percent near a known source of pollution	Percent closed in 2002
Great Lakes	382	69.6	23.3%
Atlantic Ocean	996	75.6	14.1
Pacific Ocean	388	75.0	13.9
Gulf of Mexico	159	89.3	1.3

Source: U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

The Detroit News

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David Coates / The Detroit News

Amy Komendera, a Macomb health department technician, takes water samples at Metro Beach. Great Lakes officials insist their beaches are safe and the health risks from pollution are low.

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