

Half of America's beaches have unsafe pollution levels: Report

July 6 2023, by Cara Murez



A day at the beach can be fun with family and friends, but water

pollution can ruin the experience.

The problem is more widespread than many might think: In a new report, the Environment America Research & Policy Center, a [nonprofit organization](#), found that half of U.S. beaches had potentially unsafe contamination levels in 2022.

Among nearly 3,200 beaches nationwide that were tested in 2022, 55% had at least one day during which fecal contamination reached potentially unsafe levels. Beaches may also have experienced contamination on days when testing did not take place, the organization noted.

Among those studied, 363 beaches had potentially unsafe levels of fecal contamination on at least 25% of testing days.

How often a state tests its beaches varies, the center said.

Contaminated water can cause gastrointestinal illness, respiratory disease, ear and eye infections and skin rashes. About 57 million cases of illness happen each year from swimming in oceans, lakes, rivers and ponds, according to the organization.

Sometimes, [contaminated water](#) triggers health warning or beach closures.

The organization noted more than 8,700 health warnings or closures at U.S. coastal and Great Lakes beaches in 2022, affecting 1 of every 12 swimming days.

Beach pollution comes from a variety of sources, including sprawling development, outdated and deteriorating sewage systems, spills from sanitary sewers, systems that combine stormwater and sewage into a

single pipe, private septic systems and factory farming.

In terms of sprawling development, the organization cites the impact of paving over more surfaces that once absorbed rainfall and filtered pollution from parking lots, roads and larger homes. Sewage and [septic systems](#) built to serve this development can also fail, the organization added.

U.S. [coastal areas](#) added 4.2 million acres of development between 1996 and 2016, while losing 640,000 acres of wetland and almost 10 million acres of forest.

Sewage from various spills or outdated systems can be particularly dangerous to beach safety because it contains bacteria, viruses and parasites.

Sewers overflow as many as 75,000 times each year in the United States. Outdated combined sewers are still present in more than 700 municipalities. Many of these systems discharge [raw sewage](#) directly into nearby waterways during heavy rain events, according to the center.

Factory farming also plays a role, with fecal pollution from [livestock production](#) generating a large volume of waste. The animals produce more manure than cropland can absorb, according to the center.

Congress' Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act passed in 2021 provides \$11.7 billion for sewage and stormwater projects and also authorizes an additional \$14.7 billion to work toward fixing some of these issues.

Still, more efforts are also needed, according to the center. These can include improving [beach](#) testing and protecting wetlands.

More information: The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has more on [beach health](#).

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