



As summer approaches and thousands enjoy our beautiful beaches and public swimming areas, the City's Health Department reminds residents to take simple precautions to keep themselves, their families, and our community, healthy.

1	Q	Can people get ill at the beach or public recreational areas?
	A	Illness can occur when people encounter harmful bacteria, viruses, or parasites that may be present in water, sand, or food. Hot weather, crowding, and limited shade or sanitation facilities can also increase health risks such as heat exhaustion, dehydration, or sunburn. Causes may include: - Swimming in polluted or contaminated water (especially after heavy rainfall and/or near known land-based pollution sources) - Eating improperly stored food or using unsafe water for washing - Poor hand hygiene after using toilets or changing areas - Injuries, open wounds or scratches that allow easy access for germs - Animal waste or bird droppings contaminating sand or picnic areas - Insect bites and contact with marine life (like jellyfish, blue bottles and seals) - Extreme heat and lack of hydration - Sunburn and heatstroke
2	Q	What are some of the illnesses you can get at the beach?
	A	Beach-related illnesses and conditions include: - Skin rashes or ear infections from contact with polluted water - Eye and respiratory irritation from algae blooms or poor air quality - Foodborne illnesses from spoiled or undercooked foods - Heat exhaustion or heat stroke from excessive sun exposure - Sunburn or dehydration - Gastrointestinal illness (nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea) from lack of hand hygiene or drinking seawater as part religious or cultural practices
3	Q	What is 'best practice' when going to the beach?
	A	To stay healthy, follow these key precautions: Before you go: - Never consume alcohol before going to the beach and be reminded that you may not consume alcohol on the beach. - Check the City of Cape Town's beach water quality reports that are uploaded weekly on the "Coastal Water Quality" webpage for latest results and beach and water quality categories. - It is not always safe to swim after heavy rain as pollutants can be washed into the ocean, especially near rivers or storm water outlets that drain into the ocean. It is recommended that after heavy rainfall swimming in the sea near storm water outlets and rivers should be avoided for at least 48 hours. - Pack clean drinking water, sunscreen, hand sanitiser, and an umbrella and hat. - If you have open cuts or wounds, consider staying out of the water until these are healed or you have recovered. - Ensure you have frozen ice-bricks to keep perishable food cold that you want to take with you to the beach. While at the beach: - Observe and obey any warning signage that may be present, especially those indicating unsafe water conditions or restricted areas. - Ensure that minors are always accompanied. - Wear light clothing with long sleeves and high necklines, a hat and sunglasses for sun protection. - Regularly wear broad-spectrum sunscreen with an SPF of 30 or higher, applying generously every two hours and after swimming or sweating. Limit your time in direct sunlight, especially between 11:00 and 15:00. - Shower before and after swimming if facilities are available. - Wash hands or use sanitiser after using shared facilities or before eating. Digging in the sand can expose your hands to germs. - Keep food chilled in a cooler and discard perishable food that has been in the sun too long. - Stay hydrated and rest in the shade regularly. - Cover cuts or wounds with waterproof plasters to prevent infection. - Avoid swimming or paddling in or near river mouths and stormwater outlets especially after rain, or near visible pollution. - Avoid swallowing or drinking sea or pool water.

4	Q	Are certain people more at risk to infection and heat-related illness?
	A	Yes, these include the following: • Young children and older adults as they dehydrate quickly • Pregnant women • Individuals with weakened immune systems or chronic illnesses • People with open wounds or recent surgery • Those spending long hours in the water, • Those in direct sun without protection Extreme heat can worsen hypertension, diabetes, heart disease, epilepsy and respiratory conditions and medication should always be taken as prescribed.
5	Q	What should I do if I get sick after visiting the beach?
	A	If you or someone in your group becomes unwell: • Stop swimming immediately and move to a cool, shaded area. • Drink fluids to stay hydrated. Signs of dehydration include dry mouth, dizziness, and reduced urination. Dehydration is more likely if you have diarrhoea or vomiting and you should start oral rehydration therapy immediately. • If symptoms include vomiting, diarrhoea, fever, rash, or ear pain, seek advice from your local clinic, or healthcare provider and report your illness to your provider especially if you believe it may be linked to food or water exposure. Note that symptoms can occur up to three days after you visited the beach. • For emergencies (severe dehydration, breathing difficulty, or confusion), call emergency medical services (e.g. 021 480 7707, or 112 toll free).
6	Q	Why is it important to heed beach signage?
	A	Warning signs are there to protect your health and safety. They may indicate: • Strong currents, riptides, shark activity, or unsafe swimming conditions • Unsafe water quality (due to high bacteria levels or possible pollution) • Temporary beach closures for public health reasons Ignoring these signs can put you and others at serious risk. Always respect closures and updates — they are based on real-time testing and safety assessments.
7	Q	Why is understanding the City's Coastal Water Quality Monitoring programme so important?
		The City monitors coastal water quality at 73 recreational beaches along Cape Town's coastline with the intention to provide the public with scientific data (published in a user-friendly format) to reflect the status of water quality at beaches in Cape Town. This rigorous process is undertaken to enable the public to make the most informed decisions when choosing to recreate at Cape Town's Beaches. Information is provided to the public on a weekly basis (typically Friday afternoons) which reflects water quality status at the 73 recreational beaches along the length of Cape Town's coastline. Members of the public are encouraged to access this information when choosing to recreate along Cape Town's coastline.
8	Q	How does the City monitor Coastal Water Quality and what does this mean for you?
		Coastal Water quality is assessed by comparing the number of enterococci (a faecal indicator bacteria) in the water samples to the South African water quality guidelines for recreational use. These guidelines are based on research into whether people swimming in waters with different numbers of faecal indicator bacteria developed gastrointestinal illness. Importantly, these guidelines define a "tolerable risk" instead of no risk at all. For most healthy people, water quality that meets the targets will pose little risk to their health, and any illness they might develop will usually be minor and short-lived. This is because humans can usually tolerate exposure to low numbers of pathogens. Toddlers, the elderly, people with weakened immune systems, as well as those that have not previously been exposed to the pathogens are more at risk. People who participate in high-exposure activities such as long-distance swimming and surfing are also at higher risk, as they are likely to swallow more water than the ordinary person. The number of bacteria in a water sample is counted as colony-forming units per 100 ml of the sample ("the count"). Percentiles of counts measured in many water samples collected over time are used to rate water quality as "excellent", "good", "sufficient" or "poor". The minimum grade for South African coastal waters for recreation is "fair/sufficient". To make the most informed decisions based on the latest Coastal Water Quality results please consult the City's Coastal Water Quality webpage where results are posted weekly, typically on a Friday afternoon.

9	Q	What affects the quality of coastal waters?
		Unfortunately, there are many inputs of contamination entering coastal waters every day, with some being more serious than others. The most serious, of course, is contamination from humans. This includes human waste, chemicals we use in our homes and gardens, medication, litter, run off from roads carrying oil and even micro-plastics from our laundry and car tyres. The less serious contamination that can harbour bacteria and still affect CWQ, can come from natural sources, such as bird and mammal excrement and decomposing kelp. From findings from many thousands of data points, we have found that at most beaches water quality is excellent unless it has been raining. Rainwater flushing through the city can flush contaminants into stormwater drains and into the coastal waters. Always try to refrain from littering or disposing of dog excrement into the stormwater drains.
10	Q	What is enterococci and why is it used to gauge health risk?
	A	Enterococcus is a type of bacteria commonly found in the intestines of humans and animals. These bacteria play important roles in maintaining a healthy balance of bacteria in the intestines, which is crucial for digestion and overall gut health. They help break down food, produce certain vitamins, and prevent harmful bacteria from colonising the intestines. However, while they are beneficial in proper proportions, overgrowth or the presence of harmful strains can lead to illness or infection. Enterococci are also typically harmless in healthy individuals but can sometimes cause infections, particularly in people with weakened immune systems. Both E. coli and enterococci are often used as indicators of water quality, as their presence in water bodies can suggest fecal contamination and the potential presence of harmful pathogens.
11	Q	Where can I find more information?
	A	Stay informed by: • Looking out for signage along the beach. • Visit the City of Cape Town's official site for Coastal Water Quality. For the latest results and beach categorization, please scroll down to "water quality results across the coastline" to download the latest information. • For marine pollution or hazard spills (oil, chemical) along beaches contact the City's Call Centre on: 021 480 7700 • For general health advice: contact your local clinic