

# HEALTHY BEACHES PROGRAM

Program Description Document

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## Preamble

### Purpose and Scope

The Healthy Beaches Program supports safe and enjoyable swimming experiences by helping reduce the risk of water-borne illness and injury at priority public beaches. The program focuses on three main areas:

- Monitoring and assessment: Pre-season public beach assessment and routine (weekly or bi-weekly) surveillance including sampling;
- Management and response: Response to complaints and adverse events at public beaches and communication strategies for the public and stakeholders; and
- Data and reporting: Collecting and summarizing information about beach conditions and recreational water quality and making this data publicly available.

Water quality at beaches can change quickly due to weather, wildlife, water movement, temperature, and human activities. Because of this, the program's sampling is designed to reflect conditions specifically in designated swimming areas, where people are most likely to be in the water. These results help guide public health decisions, including when to advise swimmers about potential risks.

A provincial list of priority public beaches is monitored each season to support consistent sampling across Saskatchewan. This approach helps focus monitoring efforts on locations with higher use or greater potential risk. While routine sampling follows this priority list, additional testing may be carried out when concerns or complaints are reported.

The program is intended for public beaches only. Private residential shorelines and unofficial swimming spots are not part of regular monitoring. Property owners with concerns about private waterfront areas may submit their own water samples for testing at their own expense.

The Ministry of Health (MoH) works closely with the Saskatchewan Health Authority (SHA) to carry out these activities. The MoH provides provincial oversight, guidance, and reporting, while the SHA leads local monitoring, follow-up, and operator engagement. This partnership helps ensure consistent practices across the province and timely public health action when concerns arise.

## Section 1: Data Collection

To support consistent monitoring, forms are completed throughout the season to ensure key information is collected and documented. Before beginning seasonal sampling, staff review the previously completed forms and become familiar with the beach's public swimming area.

Background information that should be reviewed includes:

- Previous water quality results;
- Local conditions such as prevailing winds, rainfall, and potential sources of contamination (e.g., stormwater outflows, sewage discharges, agricultural or urban runoff);
- Topographical maps or aerial photographs to understand site layout; and
- Input from the beach owner or operator, including site history and up-to-date contact information.

### **(1) Annual Environmental Health and Safety Survey (EHSS)**

Each year, an EHSS is completed for every priority public beach in the monitoring program. The survey is typically filled out by the beach operator, who is most familiar with the site and surrounding land uses. The EHSS helps identify existing or potential sources of contamination that may affect the safe use of the swimming area.

### **(2) Sample Collection Form**

During each sampling event, staff collect the required water samples and record all necessary information on the Sample Collection Form.

## Section 2: Sampling

Sampling is carried out throughout the swimming season to help protect public health. The sampling program is intended to:

- Assess whether water quality meets the [Guidelines for Canadian Recreational Water Quality](#);
- Identify and respond to water quality issues, such as elevated bacteria levels or conditions that may require a beach advisory;
- Provide timely public notifications so beach goers can make informed decisions;
- Track long-term trends in water quality;
- Use Environmental Health and Safety Survey (EHSS) data to identify influences on the beach and beach water.

### (1) Sampling Frequency

From late June through early September, priority public beaches are sampled weekly or bi-weekly to ensure consistent monitoring during the busiest part of the season and to detect potential contamination early.

Lower priority public beaches are sampled on a demand or complaint basis when conditions indicate a potential risk. Triggers may include:

- Reports of illness or injury potentially linked to swimming at the public swimming area;
- Test results or information from other agencies;
- Events such as sewage spills, flooding, or chemical releases;
- Development of cyanobacteria (blue-green algae) blooms; and/or
- Public complaints or other reports requiring follow-up.

This approach directs monitoring resources to locations where they are most needed and allows potential risks to be assessed quickly. To support timely testing and weekly public updates, water samples are collected early in the week.

### (2) Sampler Safety

All sampling activities are carried out with staff safety in mind. Employers must ensure safe practices and provide clear information about workplace hazards. Staff also play an important role by:

- Knowing the hazards associated with their work and how to manage them;
- Participating in identifying and addressing workplace risks; and
- Exercising their right to refuse work, they believe is unusually dangerous.

These principles help ensure that sampling is conducted safely and responsibly.

### (3) Sampling Methodology

Water samples are collected in a way that reflects the conditions swimmers are most likely to encounter:

- **Depth:** Samples are taken at approximately waist depth (about 1 metre), with water collected 15–30 cm below the surface (“elbow deep”).

- **Coverage:** Sampling locations are spaced to represent the full swimming area, with at least five samples collected at each site.
- **Local Conditions:** Plans may be adjusted based on factors such as known or suspected contamination sources, peak swimmer activity, areas used by young children, and weather or site characteristics.

In rare situations, such as during outbreak investigations, sand or sediment may also be sampled, as microorganisms can persist in beach sand.

#### (4) Water Sample Testing

After samples are collected, they are analyzed at the accredited Roy Romanow Provincial Laboratory (RRPL). Testing focuses on key indicators that help assess whether the water is safe for swimming:

- ***E. coli*:** A fecal indicator organism used to assess the level of contamination in beach water.
- **Microcystin:** A toxin that can be produced during cyanobacteria (blue-green algae) blooms. Samples may be screened when blooms are present or suspected.
- **General water characteristics:** Such as turbidity, pH, and conductivity, which help provide a broader picture of beach water conditions.

Note: The RRPL does not perform or recommend water testing for Swimmer’s Itch. Such cases are usually identified through increased public reports to healthcare providers. When this happens, the local health authority may issue a caution or advisory for the affected beach. A public fact sheet with more information is available at the [Healthy Beaches Program website](#).

#### (5) Water Quality Indicator Limits

Indicator	Guideline Value
<i>E. coli</i>	≤ 235 cfu/100 mL
Microcystin	10 µg/L

#### (6) Water Sample Results Notification

Water sample results are sent to both the MoH and the SHA. The MoH updates the provincial Healthy Beaches website, including the interactive beach map, and provides weekly water quality summaries to partner agencies.

In consultation with the MoH, the SHA reviews result for each beach and determines whether any follow-up actions are needed. When required, SHA staff work directly with beach operators on measures such as posting advisories and collecting additional samples.

## Section 3: Public Health Response

### 1. Public Communications

Beachgoers are informed of any water quality or safety concerns through clearly posted cautions, advisories, or beach closure signs. Signage is standardized across the province to ensure consistency. Examples of the signs used for cautions and advisories are provided in Appendix A.

- **Swimming Caution:**  
As an interim measure, the SHA may issue a “Swimming Caution” when an algal bloom is confirmed but microcystin results are still pending. Sampling typically occurs within 48 hours of a complaint to determine whether microcystin is present. If levels exceed the guideline, caution signs are upgraded to advisory signs. If levels are acceptable but the bloom persists, caution signs may remain in place to address physical safety concerns (e.g., slippery surfaces or entanglement hazards).
- The Healthy Beaches Program website includes an algal bloom complaint form managed by the MoH. Complaints must relate to a public beach area and be supported by photo evidence, which is shared with partner agencies to guide timely follow-up where necessary.
- **Swimming Advisory:**  
If the SHA determines that water quality is unsuitable for swimming, such as when bacteria or toxin levels exceed provincial guidelines, a swimming advisory is issued. Contact with the beach itself is generally still permitted, and access to facilities (e.g., washrooms, picnic areas, playgrounds) is typically not restricted.
- **Beach Closure:**  
Beach closure orders are issued by a public health office with the local health authority under *The Public Health Act, 1994*. A closure may be ordered when a beach or body of water is considered to pose a serious risk to the health and safety of recreational users. When a closure is in place, the area is off-limits to all recreational activity. The public is formally advised that the beach and water are closed, and access to nearby facilities may also be restricted.

Cautions, advisories, and closures are lifted as soon as conditions allow, which may include follow-up sampling that confirms water quality is within safe limits. Cautions and advisories automatically expire at the end of the swimming season.

## Appendix A – Signage


The *Health Hazard Regulations* enable the local health authority to post signs or require operators/owners of public places to post signs notifying the public of potential health hazards.

Signs should be posted in highly visible locations (e.g., all beach entryways, washrooms, bulletin boards, etc.). As a standard, they should be of an appropriate size and colour, and waterproof.

Example Signage (available from local public health inspection office):

# CAUTION

TOXIC ALGAE MAY BE PRESENT




Water at this beach may be unsafe for people and pets.

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**Until further notice:**

- Avoid water with visible algae or scum
- Keep children and pets out of the water
- Do not drink lake water


**If exposure occurs, rinse off immediately.** Seek medical or veterinary care if you or your animal show illness or signs of poisoning.



Visit the Healthy Beaches Website




Connect with a local Public Health Inspector

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# ADVISORY

WATER NOT SUITABLE FOR SWIMMING




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**High levels of harmful bacteria are present in these waters and may pose a serious health risk.**



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# ADVISORY

HIGH LEVELS OF TOXIC ALGAE PRESENT




Water at this beach may pose a serious risk to people and pets.

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**Until further notice:**

- Avoid water with visible algae or scum
- Keep children and pets out of the water
- Do not drink lake water


**If exposure occurs, rinse off immediately.** Seek medical or veterinary care if you or your animal show illness or signs of poisoning.



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