

Recreational Water Quality: What you need to know

Planning to go outdoors?

People flock to the beaches, lakes and rivers in summer for many different activities including; swimming, diving, surfing, sailing, tramping or kayaking.

Unfortunately a number of disease-causing bugs may enter our recreational waters which can pose a health hazard. These organisms include viruses, algal blooms, bacteria and protozoa, and exposure may cause a variety of illnesses.

How can this affect your health?

The risk of catching disease from waterways is usually low, however when contamination levels are high following heavy rainfall, there is an increased chance that you may catch a stomach, skin or respiratory infection.

Illnesses relating to contact with recreational water include:

- Gastrointestinal illness (vomiting and diarrhoea) such as salmonella, giardia, campylobacter and cryptosporidium;
- Respiratory illnesses (such as asthma);
- Skin, eye and ear infections or irritations; and
- Tingling and numbness around the mouth or tips of fingers.

There may be a greater risk to those with reduced immunity, such as the elderly and the very young.

What is the risk?

Contamination may enter our waterways through leaky drainage and sewer pipes, and through untreated sewage discharges. There is also greater risk where there are stock crossings or free access by stock to the waterways upstream.

The potential hazard increases further during or shortly after rainfall when contamination may be washed into waterways mainly from urban and farm storm water runoff. **Consequently, it is best to avoid recreational water activities for 48 hours after any rainfall that leads to discolouration of the water.** Let the waters clear for at least two days to make sure you avoid any increased exposure to faecal contamination.

Cyanobacteria can multiply and form algal blooms in lakes or thick mats attached to river and stream beds. Some species produce natural toxins which can be a threat to people and animals. There have been numerous reports of dog deaths from eating the mats which collect on the banks of rivers.

What are the risks for food or water collection?

Where contamination levels are too high for swimming and signs are in place, fish or shellfish should not be collected for human consumption.

Water from these sites also should not be collected for use as drinking water or for washing gear or utensils.



What is being done to reduce the risk?

Environment Canterbury (ECan) monitors both marine and freshwater recreational water quality in Canterbury and South Canterbury and grade these waterways. Water monitoring is based on guidelines released by the Ministry for the Environment and the Ministry of Health. This monitoring period runs each year between November and March.

Any identified risk to public health is notified on the ECan website: <https://www.ecan.govt.nz/your-region/your-environment/water/health-warnings/>
A media release may also be issued.



Permanent signs are erected at sites where the water quality grading is consistently poor or very poor. You are advised not to swim at these locations.

Temporary signs are erected at sites where the monitoring sample exceeds the safe levels as detailed on the ECan website.

Permanent information signs are erected at sites that historically have had algal blooms. Temporary warning signs are erected at sites when algal blooms are present.

You are advised not to swim at these locations where signs are in place.



Where do I get more information?

[Check out the Can I Swim Here? information on LAWA](#) if you are thinking of getting into the water over summer.

Contact your local regional council: Environment Canterbury (ECan)

0800 765 588 or www.ecan.govt.nz

Your local council:

- Ashburton District Council (03 307 7700)
- Christchurch City Council (03 941 8999 or 0800 800 159)
- Hurunui District Council (03 314 8816)
- Kaikoura District Council (03 319 5026)
- MacKenzie District Council (0800 685 8514)
- Selwyn District Council (03 347 2799 or 0800 735 996)
- Timaru District Council (03 687 7200)
- Waimakariri District Council (0800 965 468)
- Waimate District Council (03 689 0000)

Te Whatu Ora
Health New Zealand