

Beaches.ie (<https://www.beaches.ie/frequently-asked-questions>)

Frequently Asked Questions

What is a 'bathing water'?

This is a term used for those locations where people swim or use beaches, lakes and rivers for recreation.

Why is bathing water quality monitored?

Bathing water quality is monitored and assessed to make sure it is safe for swimming during the summer bathing season.

When is bathing water monitored?

Bathing water quality is monitored during the summer bathing season which is between 1 June and 15 September.

Some local authorities also voluntarily monitor outside of the summer bathing season.

What is an 'Identified bathing water'?

This is the legal term used for those beaches and lakes managed under the Bathing Water Regulations. Local authorities are responsible for identifying bathing waters within their area. These are generally the waters considered to be the most popular. The EPA report these to the European Commission each year.

The public can propose that new bathing waters be identified under the Bathing Water Regulations. The EPA has published guidance to help with this.

What is an 'Other monitored water'?

This description generally applies to smaller and less popular beaches that are monitored by local authorities as a voluntary public health measure. These beaches are not formally managed under the Bathing Water Regulations

Where can I check the latest bathing water quality?

Our national bathing water website www.beaches.ie shares the latest information on more than 200 bathing waters sampled during the bathing water season.

www.beaches.ie gives you information about:

- beaches near you

- which beaches have safe water quality or have known pollution events
- the weather and tides
- beach amenities, including accessibility and availability of beach wheelchairs

So, before you head to the beach, find out what the latest water quality is and make sure there are no reported swim restrictions. This information will allow you to make an informed decision about which beach you will use.

You can also follow us on X [@EPABeaches](#) – this account will message the latest updates on any incidents during the bathing season.

Is my favourite beach monitored?

You can search by name, county or look at the map on [beaches.ie](#) to see if your favourite beach is monitored.

A full list of all identified bathing waters at beaches and lakes is available at [www.beaches.ie/beaches-lakes](#)

Should I swim if the lifeguard red flag flying?

Never swim where a sign says not to or when the red flag is flying.

The red flag is flown when there is a water safety risk e.g. the presence of dangerous under-currents. The red flag can also be flown when there is an increased risk of illness if you go into the water or when the water is polluted.

How do I know it is safe to swim?

There are different ways you can use to find out what is the latest quality status of bathing waters and if there are any current warnings or advice against bathing:

- [www.beaches.ie](#) – before going to the bathing water you can check the EPA national bathing water website [beaches.ie](#) to see the latest water quality (excellent, good, sufficient or poor) and find out if there are any current warnings or advice against bathing notices in relation to water quality
- **At the beach or lake** – lifeguards will fly the red flags when bathing waters are considered unsafe for bathing. You can check out the notice boards to see the latest water quality and if any warnings or advice against bathing notices have been posted by the local authorities
- **The 48-hour rule after heavy rain** – swimming after heavy rainfall carries an added risk of pollution from surface runoff and is best avoided for 48 hours. Further

information can be found on www.beaches.ie/protect-your-health-with-the-48-hour-rule/

- **@EPABeaches** – You can follow the [@EPABeaches](#) X account and receive messages of news and information on bathing waters and messages of when bathing water incidents start and are over

Should I swim after heavy rain? What is the 48-hour rule?

You should not swim for 48 hours after any heavy rain.

Heavy rain can wash pollution into rivers, lakes and our seas and in some instances overwhelm sewage systems giving rise to the operation of storm overflows. The impacts of these events are generally very short-lived lasting typically 1 or 2 days.

Swimming after heavy rainfall is best avoided as it carries an added risk of pollution.

Learn more: www.beaches.ie/protect-your-health-with-the-48-hour-rule/

What should I do if I see signs of pollution in the water at a beach?

This should be reported to your local authority's bathing water section.

Contact details can be found here: www.beaches.ie/contact-local-authorities

What can I do to reduce the risk of illness after bathing?

To reduce the risk of illness after swimming you can:

- Avoid swallowing or splashing water
- Wash your hands before handling food
- Avoid swimming with an open cut or wound
- Avoid swimming if you are pregnant or have a weakened immune system.

The HSE has published [guidance on swimming and health](#)

How is bathing water quality monitored?

Samples of water are taken from the beach. This sample is sent to a lab to test for the presence of two species of bacteria, E. coli and Intestinal Enterococci.

What are intestinal enterococci? (I.E.)

Enterococci are bacteria that live in the intestinal tracts of warm-blooded animals, including humans, and therefore indicate possible contamination of streams and rivers with faecal waste (poo).

They are used as indicators of the possible presence of other harmful micro-organisms, like viruses.

What are Escherichia coli? (E. Coli)

This is a bacterium found in both human and animal faeces (poo) in large numbers.

They are used as indicators of the possible presence of other harmful micro-organisms, like viruses.

Why do we test for the bacteria E. coli and Intestinal Enterococci when monitoring bathing waters?

Both bacteria E. coli and Intestinal Enterococci are tested for as if they are in the water that indicates the water has been contaminated with faeces (poo). Their presence in large numbers in bathing waters is a warning of a possible health risk from other harmful bacteria and viruses which might also be present.

How long does it take to analyse a bathing water sample for E. coli and Intestinal Enterococci?

E.coli results are usually available within 21 to 24 hours. The Intestinal Enterococci result is usually a day later as it takes about 48 hours to test.

The exception to this would be where a sample is taken but held over night before being analysed e.g. a Sunday or weekend sample. Occasionally the Enterococci test can take a little longer depending on the bacteria and this can delay the issuing of the result although this occurs quite rarely.

Both results are required for compliance with the 2008 Bathing Water Regulations and HSE Guidelines.

What kind of warnings are there if there is a potential problem with pollution?

There are three main types of warnings you will see.

These are:

- *Prior Warning Notices*
- *Advice Against Bathing*
- *Temporary Bathing Prohibitions*

What is a *Prior Warning Notice*?

Some bathing waters are more likely to experience water quality problems when it rains.

When heavy rainfall is forecast, many local authorities will put up a notice giving a 'Prior warning' of pollution events at these bathing waters.

'Prior warning' notices do not necessarily mean that pollution will occur. These are used in a precautionary approach to protect bathers' health by advising the public of possible short-term pollution events which usually last for only a few days at most.

What is *Advice Against Bathing*?

Swimmers are advised not to swim at this beach due to a potential risk to their health.

An Advice Against Bathing restriction is a warning notice put in place at a bathing water where the local authority has evidence that there is a higher than usual amount of E coli and/or intestinal enterococci in the water, which could impact swimmers' health.

Swimming is not advised and the local authority issue advice about precautions which should be taken by those who do decide to swim.

The notice remains in place until the local authority has evidence from a water quality sample that the levels of E coli or intestinal enterococci have reduced to safe levels.

What is a *Bathing Prohibition*?

This means swimming is not allowed at this bathing water to protect swimmers' health.

A bathing prohibition is a notice put in place at a bathing water where the local authority has evidence that there is a high quantity of E coli and/or intestinal enterococci in the water, which indicate a risk to swimmer's health.

The levels are higher than those to warrant an advice against bathing and so swimming is prohibited.

The notice remains in place until such time that the local authority has evidence from a water quality sample that the levels of E coli or intestinal enterococci have reduced to safe levels.

Are temporary prohibition notices or advice against bathing notices erected outside the bathing season?

Temporary prohibition or advice against bathing notices are not usually erected outside the bathing season.

Bathing restriction notices are legally required during the Bathing Season which runs from 1 June to 15 September. Such notices form part of the Bathing Water Regulations 2008 requirements and local authorities put them up after consultation with the Health Service Executive and notification of the Environmental Protection Agency.

Some local authorities may voluntarily issue a notice outside the summer bathing season.

What happens if there is a pollution incident?

During the bathing water season, swimming restrictions may be put in place at the beach if:

- a pollution incident (explained below) occurs, or
- water sampling indicates there could be a risk to human health

When swimming restrictions are in place:

- details are put up on www.beaches.ie.
- signs are put up at the beach notice boards
- restrictions may be advertised in the media and on local authority websites
- the EPA X account @EPABeaches sends out alerts.

Restrictions stay in place until sampling shows that the water quality has returned to normal.

What is the biggest problem affecting our beaches?

The most common sources of pollution are agriculture, urban wastewater and fouling from dogs and sea birds.

What is an annual water quality rating / bathing water classification and why is it based on 4 years of results?

The annual water quality rating of a beach is based on water quality monitoring results covering the previous four years. Basing the assessment over a 4-year period provides a better overall assessment of water quality at the beach.

An excellent annual water quality rating of a beach does not necessarily mean that the current water quality will be the same.

From 2014 on, the annual classification of bathing waters uses the new assessment specified in the 2008 Bathing Water Quality Regulations. Bathing water samples are assessed against stricter criteria for the parameters, *Escherichia coli* and Intestinal Enterococci, with different criteria for coastal/transitional waters and inland waters.

The annual water quality status is now determined from results covering a four-year period rather than just the past season's results and using statistical methods rather than simple percentage compliance.

This approach is more robust, as it averages out the impacts of seasonal variations and takes account of the spread of results.

Annual Bathing Water Classifications include:

★★★ *Excellent*

★★ *Good*

★ *Sufficient*

– *Poor*

New classification not possible

A new bathing water identified for monitoring and assessment under the 2008 Bathing Water Quality Regulations will remain classed as 'New' until 16 samples are available following identification to allow for assessment of its water quality classification.

Changes classification not possible

The previously poor bathing water has significantly improved due to management measures put in place and can be reclassified after receiving 16 bathing water samples.

What are the Bathing Water Regulations?

This is the law that sets out how bathing waters are managed in Ireland. It defines the roles and responsibilities of local authorities, the EPA and HSE and the rules for the bathing season in Ireland. It refers to Statutory Instrument 79 of 2008 ([SI 79 of 2008](#)), the Bathing Water Quality Regulations 2008, which brought the EU Bathing Water Directive 2006/7/EC into Irish legislation.

What are the major sources of pollution for faecal bacteria in bathing waters?

Faecal contamination (pollution from poo) makes water unsafe for recreational activities such as swimming.

There are five major sources of pollution responsible for the faecal bacteria in our bathing waters.

These sources increase when it rains, washing more pollution into rivers, lakes and seas and in times of very heavy rain can overwhelm sewage systems. The impacts of these events are generally very short-lived lasting 1 or 2 days.

Pollution from waste water treatment plants & sewage systems – bacteria from sewage can enter our waters as a result of system failures or storm overflows or directly from sewage works

Run off from diffuse agriculture – Pollution from agriculture can be widespread over large areas. This kind of diffuse pollution can be more difficult to locate than smaller ‘point’ sources of pollution like pipes or channels.

Water draining from urban areas – water draining from cities, towns and built up areas via street drains and culverts following heavy rain can contain pollution including animal and bird faeces from roads and other paved surfaces

Domestic sewage – misconnected drains and poorly located and maintained septic tanks can pollute surface and ground water systems

Animals and birds on or near beaches – dog, bird, and other animal faeces (poo) can affect bathing water as they often contain high levels of bacteria

Can I learn some more about ‘Other monitored waters’?

Some other places where people swim, but that are not formally identified as bathing waters, are still monitored by local authorities for water quality.

These are generally smaller, or more remote beaches. Their infrastructure to cater for big crowds (for example, car parking facilities) may not be as well developed as the popular bathing areas, but they are still considered important for eco-tourism purposes.

An Taisce inspect many of these waters under the Green Coast award scheme.

We recommend that bathers check www.beaches.ie or signage at the beach, where present, to review the most up to date bathing water quality. You can also contact the local authority for information.

What do we know about water quality at an ‘Other monitored water’?

The EPA have assessed the monitoring information for the ‘Other Monitored Waters’ and has published an assessment of the quality that is likely at these waters. This assessment is published in the annual EPA Bathing Water Report.

Monitoring at ‘Other Monitored Waters’ may not be carried out to the same standard or minimum frequency (at least once a month) required for identified bathing waters. Results reported to the EPA are available on www.beaches.ie

The EPA encourages local authorities to formally identify these bathing waters where practical.

Should I visit other local beaches that are not listed?

Swimming at identified bathing waters is recommended as these are monitored and managed by local authorities to protect your health. If you choose to swim where water quality is not monitored it may be riskier to your health.

See Water Safety Irelands tips for open water swimmers. [Open Water Swimming – Water Safety Ireland](#)

Can I take my dog to a beach with a designated bathing water?

Some beaches with designated bathing waters restrict dog access, especially during the summer bathing season. Please check your beach page on www.beaches.ie and check the signs and noticeboards at your local beach before bringing your dog on the beach. If you take your dog to the beach, please remember to bag and bin any dog poo, burying it is not sufficient to prevent risk to other beach users.

If a beach is closed to swimming can I still go to the beach?

Yes.

What is a 'Blue Flag' beach?

To get a Blue Flag for a beach it must meet a set standard for water quality, information provision, environmental education, safety and environmental management.

Blue Flag is an international award, and it therefore has one minimum global standard for water quality. The beach must comply with the standard outlined in the Blue Flag criteria or the standard outlined in national legislation, whichever is the most demanding.

The standard required by Blue Flag beaches in Ireland is an Annual Water Quality Rating of Excellent, the highest rating.

The annual water quality rating of a beach is based on water quality monitoring results covering the previous four years. Basing the assessment over a 4-year period provides a better overall assessment of water quality at the beach. An excellent annual water quality rating of a beach does not necessarily mean that the current water quality will be the same.

In addition, there is the Green Coast Award. This is to recognise beaches of high environmental quality. The award is for beaches which have excellent water quality, but which are also prized for their natural, unspoilt environment. Applicant sites must be

managed in partnership with the local community to be considered for the Green Coast Award. The programme is supported by the Department of the Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

Ireland's Blue Flag Programme is managed by An Taisce. For information on both schemes, see www.beachawards.ie

Does the beach get given the Blue Flag for ever?

Blue Flags are applied for annually and awarded for one year at a time. See www.beachawards.ie

Why was my beach not identified by my local authority?

If your beach is not identified by your local authority this could be for reasons like:

- relatively low numbers of people swimming
- accessibility issues
- poor water quality or
- limited amenities (e.g. lack of public toilets or inadequate parking)

How can I suggest my favourite beach for identification?

People can make a submission to their local authority on which beaches should be designated.

The EPA has written a guide to what information you need to include to nominate bathing areas.

The EPA has also written guidance on how any nominations should be assessed by local authorities.

Both of these guides are available to download from the [Resources](#) page on beaches.ie

What is a sampling calendar?

This is a calendar showing the scheduled date for all samples taken at an identified bathing waters during the summer season. It must be submitted by the relevant local authority in advance of the start of the bathing season.

What are 'monitoring points'?

This is a designated location within an identified bathing water where a water sample is taken at least once a month during the bathing season.

The monitoring point for a bathing water is chosen based on where most bathers are

expected or where the risk of pollution is greatest.

Knowing where and when each sample will be taken in advance helps ensure transparency and accountability.

What does ‘*management measures*’ mean?

‘Management measures’ means the following measures undertaken with respect to bathing water:

- establishing and maintaining a bathing water profile
- establishing a monitoring calendar
- monitoring a bathing water
- assessing bathing water quality
- classifying bathing water
- identifying and assessing causes of pollution that might affect bathing waters and impair the health of bathers;
- giving information to the public
- taking action to prevent the exposure of bathers to pollution
- taking action to reduce the risk of pollution

What are ‘pathogens’?

A pathogen is an organism that can cause disease in humans or animals.

What are coliforms?

Coliform bacteria are organisms that are present in the environment and in the faeces (poo) of all warm-blooded animals and humans. Coliform bacteria are not likely to cause any illness. However, their presence in water indicates that disease-causing organisms (pathogens) could be in the water.

Most pathogens that can contaminate water supplies come from the faeces of humans or animals.

Testing water for all possible pathogens is complex, time-consuming, and expensive. It is relatively easy and inexpensive to test for coliform bacteria.

What happens at a beach when the standards are not being met?

The minimum standard required at all beaches is Sufficient.

When a bathing water is classified as Poor, the local authority must prepare a management plan which outlines the actions which will be taken to improve the bathing water quality to at least Sufficient standard, and a bathing restriction must be put in

place for a full season from 1 June to 15 September.

Bathing waters that are classified as Poor for five consecutive years must be declassified and are no longer identified under the Bathing Water Regulations.

What are does a ‘Sufficient’ annual classification mean at a bathing water?

This means the water quality meets the minimum standard.

Local authorities should carry out appropriate actions to improve the Sufficient bathing waters to Good or Excellent, and to prevent deterioration to Poor.

What are does a ‘Poor’ annual classification mean at a bathing water?

A ‘Poor’ classification means that it is not safe to swim at this beach.

The bathing water has not met the minimum standard required under the Bathing Water Regulations.

For Poor bathing waters, the local authority must put up notices at the beach telling the public why there is a Poor water quality rating.

Work must be done by local authorities to improve Poor bathing waters to at least Sufficient quality.

Bathing waters that are classified as Poor for five consecutive years must be declassified and are no longer identified under the Bathing Water Regulations.

What is a ‘Declassified’ bathing water?

A bathing water is declassified when it is no longer identified under the Bathing Water Regulations. This usually happens if it is classified as ‘Poor’ for 5 consecutive years.

What is the difference between Bathing Season Water Quality and Annual Water Quality Ratings?

On www.beaches.ie, two quality indicators are displayed prominently. The “Bathing Season Water Quality” refers to the result of the last sample taken. This field also shows the results of previous samples.

Annual Water Quality Ratings are the rating which the beach received for the previous season based on an average of the 4 prior seasons. This gives an overall assessment of water quality at the beach.