

Recreational Water Related Illnesses: A Rapid Literature Review – Summary Report

Background

Open waters like lakes, rivers and seas are commonly used for recreational activities, open water swimming is becoming increasingly popular around the world and has many health and well-being benefits; however, open waters are not sterile and may contain microorganisms that can make you ill which may be naturally present in the water or introduced by different sources of pollution like sewage, animals, wildlife and humans.

A rapid evidence review that focussed on infections and illnesses was carried out to investigate the health risks of open-water swimming. The review summarises evidence from 10 European studies that explored outcomes of illnesses after individuals bathed or swam in open water settings, from the year 2000-2023, including 1 study about the River Thames in England.

What are the health risks?

- Gastrointestinal illness/ stomach bugs were the most commonly reported illness, symptoms are nausea, diarrhoea, stomach pain, vomiting, dizziness or fever.
- Respiratory infections were also commonly reported, which cause cold or flu-like symptoms like coughing, sore throat, fever and shortness of breath.
- Ear, eye and skin infections were also a risk, symptoms included red spots, bumps and rashes.

How to keep safe using open water

- Check the bathing water quality of your site: [find a bathing water](#) - The Environment Agency routinely monitors open water sites in England these are called “bathing waters”, many rivers and inland lakes are not bathing waters. There are no bathing waters within Southampton.
- Be aware of weather conditions, particularly heavy rainfall as the quality of the water may be reduced or affected by sewage runoff.
- Observe local safety advice around the site.
- Try to avoid swallowing water whilst swimming as this increases the risk of getting ill.
- Avoid swimming if you are experiencing symptoms of illness to avoid transmission to other users.
- After exposure to open water, remove wet swimwear or wetsuits immediately, wash your hands or use antibacterial hand sanitiser and shower as soon as possible.
- If you become seriously ill after open water exposure, seek medical attention from the G.P.

For further information on open water safety

- GOV.uk [Swim healthy](#) leaflet details how to reduce the health risks.
- The River Trust [is my river fit to play in?](#) this website provides a map and near real-time alerts of sewage discharges and overflows into rivers in England & Wales.
- Surfers Against Sewage [App](#) and [website](#) combines the Environment Agency’s pollution risk forecasts with water company sewage spill data.
- [National water safety forum](#) – advice and resources on open water swimming safety.