

Frequently Asked Questions: Lake, Stream and River Water Quality

- What levels of E. Coli result in a health advisory?
 - o Licensed beaches are required to post a health advisory when E. Coli levels exceed 235 units of E. Coli. The beach can remain open, but patrons should take precautions to prevent ingestion of water, if possible.
 - o Licensed beaches are closed when E. Coli levels exceed 1000 unit of E. Coli. The beaches remain closed until testing confirms E. Coli levels drop below 1000.
 - o For non-beach recreational waters such as lakes, streams, and rivers, a health advisory caution is issued when E. Coli levels exceed 235 units and a high risk advisory is issued when E. Coli levels reach 1000 units.

- What does an E. Coli Health advisory really mean, will I get sick being in contact with the water?

An E. coli advisory is a warning that E. Coli and other pathogens are likely present in the surface waters. E. Coli can result in intestinal illness. The main health risk comes from ingesting significant amounts of water from activities such as swimming or perhaps water skiing. General contact with the waters while fishing, boating, kayaking, or wading in streams is not likely to result in a significant health risk, however extra precautions should be taken to shower after activities and wash hands after exposure or prior to eating.

- Does an E. Coli health advisory also apply for my dog? Yes, although dogs often have more of an iron stomach than people, they are susceptible to many of the same pathogens as we are and avoiding or limiting their ingestion of surface water is always advised.

- How often do you test for E. Coli and what are the current E. Coli levels of Rock County lakes and rivers? We test 4 licensed beaches and the Rock River on a weekly basis. We test seven lakes and rivers that have regular recreational activity on a monthly basis, and we test 13 other locations on an annual or more frequent basis. Our website has the most updated results. Because many locations are not tested weekly, it is advised that caution be used the days immediately after large rain and runoff events as the probability for elevated pathogens increases. <http://www.co.rock.wi.us/publichealth-beach-sampling>

- Is it OK to canoe or kayak during an advisory? When an E. Coli advisory is issued, the primary health risk is from ingestion of the significant amounts of water which would be most risky when swimming or water skiing. The risk from other activities is low, especially if proper handwashing and showering is implemented after exposure.

- If E. Coli is high, is it safe to eat fish? Although E. coli is not known to be transferred into the meat of fish, as with any conditions, proper rinsing, cleaning and cooking of fish will reduce or eliminate potential risks of cross-contamination from E. Coli or any other pathogens in water.

- Do you Test for anything else other than E. Coli? Yes, we also monitor the pH, conductivity, water levels, temperature, nitrates, and the presence of blue-green algae at each location. These other parameters are used to look at long-term trends in water quality.

Frequently Asked Questions: Blue-Green Algae

- Do you test for blue-green algae? We do not conduct lab testing for blue-green algae, mainly because it can be quite variable when it appears or disappears. We rely on staff and community observers to watch for signs of blue-green algae and we report back to the public when the conditions warrant an advisory.
- What does blue-green algae look like? Often times, blue-green algae will appear on the surface of lakes and ponds looking like paint on the water. The colors are not always blue or green, past observations have been made on area lakes of the algae being white in color or even red or yellow. Other signs of algae growth include scum layers or a 'pea soup' appearance in the water.
- Why is blue-green algae a health concern? Blue-green algae or Harmful Algae Blooms (HAB) is particularly a concern because of the toxins potentially produced that can cause neurological effects and skin rash. Immediate medical attention may be necessary with symptoms such as vomiting, nausea, diarrhea, allergic reaction and difficulty breathing after a significant exposure. Dogs are particularly vulnerable do to their potential for ingestion while swimming.
- What causes blue-green algae? Although algae blooms are common and many are not harmful, the conditions of nutrient rich waters, calm winds, warm temperatures and sunny days can be a recipe for producing harmful algae blooms that can produce toxins. Most of these factors such as the weather, are not controllable, however, reduction in nutrients such as phosphorus reaching surface water after rainfall runoff events is the best way to reduce harmful algae blooms.