



Fact Sheet

Is it Safe to Swim in the Willamette River in Portland?

The Willamette River in Portland is safe for swimming and other recreational uses at most times of the year.

DEQ and Portland monitor water quality

DEQ monitors water quality monthly at the Hawthorne Bridge and St. John's Bridge in downtown Portland. The City of Portland also regularly monitors water quality at several locations on the Willamette River in the Portland area. Since Portland's completion of a sewer overflow control system in 2011, DEQ and city monitoring show very few water samples containing unhealthy bacteria levels. These elevated bacteria levels tend to occur in the fall, winter and early spring season, and may be due to rain washing bacteria into the river. Exposure to bacteria is the greatest health concern for people swimming in the river.

What about other pollutants?

Water quality monitoring by DEQ and other groups have found pollutants, such as metals, pesticides and pharmaceutical products in the Lower Willamette River. Many of these pollutant concentrations are quite low. Other pollutants accumulate in riverbed sediment and pose more risk to fish and other aquatic life than to people recreating in the river. The presence of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), dioxins/furans, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs) and the pesticide DDT are associated with the Portland Harbor Superfund Site, an approximate 10-mile stretch of the Willamette River downstream of the Broadway Bridge. The biggest risk to human health in this area is from eating fish that live year-round in the river, such as bass, carp, and catfish.

Harmful Algal Blooms

Swimmers should stay out of the river if the water looks foamy, scummy, bright green, or thick like blue-green paint. Blue-green algae may cause these conditions and can produce toxins that are harmful to humans and pets. Dogs are especially sensitive to these toxins and should be kept away from affected waters. Blooms have occurred on the Willamette River in the Portland area during the summer and fall when low flows, high temperatures and nutrients provide favorable conditions for blue-green algae growth. [Consult the Oregon Health Authority for current harmful algal bloom advisories.](#)

How to reduce exposure to pollutants

While generally it is considered safe to swim in the Willamette River, the river has a large watershed and pollutants can reach the water from many potential sources. The Oregon Health Authority gives the following simple precautions to reduce exposure to a variety of pollutants:

- Avoid swimming after a heavy rainfall.
- Remind children not to drink water from any untreated waterbody
- Wash hands before eating and shower after swimming to wash off river water.

- Avoid swimming in cloudy water.

Real-time information is available

The City of Portland collects weekly bacteria samples during the summer from several popular recreation areas on the Willamette River. For bacteria results and other water quality information, go to [Check the Rec.](#)

For more information please contact:

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Alternate formats

DEQ can provide documents in an alternate format or in a language other than English upon request. Call DEQ at 800-452-4011 or email deqinfo@deq.oregon.gov.