

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 pose more risk to fish and other aquatic life than to people recreating in the river. The presence of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs - now banned), dioxins/furans, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons and the pesticide DDT (now banned) 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 northern pikeminnow and bass, rather than swallowing small amounts of water while swimming. These pollutants tend to bioaccumulate in sediment and fatty fish.

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:

<http://public.health.oregon.gov/HealthyEnvironments/Recreation/HarmfulAlgaeBlooms/Pages/index.aspx>



Willamette River near Poet's Beach.

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 and advisories are available

The Oregon Health Authority and DEQ recommend that anyone considering swimming in the Portland area first consult the Portland River Alert Program for current advisories: www.portlandoregon.gov/bes/overflow.

For more information please contact:

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Alternative formats

Documents can be provided upon request in an alternate format for individuals with disabilities or in a language other than English for people with limited English skills. To request a document in another format or language, call DEQ in Portland at 503-229-5696, or toll-free in Oregon at 1-800-452-4011, ext. 5696; or email deqinfo@deq.state.or.us.



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