

## **What You Can Do to Improve Beachwater Quality: Testing the Waters 2005 NRDC's Annual Guide to Water Quality at Vacation Beaches**

Everyone can help reduce beachwater pollution. For example, we can all take steps to reduce the amount of water sent to sewage treatment plants—which have the potential to overflow—by using the best management practices to reduce polluted runoff and by disposing of boating waste properly. Individuals can also make a difference by becoming educated and expressing their desire for clean, healthy water. Below are 12 simple actions individuals can take to improve our beachwater.

**Conserve Water.** Reduce the amount of water you use at home. Extra water overwhelms sewage treatment plants and contributes to raw sewage overflows. 1) Do not let the water run unnecessarily when brushing your teeth, shaving, or washing dishes. 2) Install a displacement device, such as a small plastic bottle, in your toilet or, even better, install a 1.6 gallon-per-flush water-saving toilet to save thousands of gallons annually. 3) Install faucet aerators and a water-efficient showerhead to save 50 percent of water previously used, as well as to save energy by reducing hot water use. 4) Use a bucket and sponge instead of a hose when washing your car to save more than 100 gallons.<sup>1</sup> 5) Try not to flush your toilet unnecessarily during heavy rains.

**Reduce or Capture Runoff.** Direct runoff from your roof and driveway to your lawn or garden, rather than to the sewer or the street. This reduces not only the necessity of watering your yard but also the amount of water entering the sewer and storm drain systems. One roof drain can discharge thousands of gallons each time it rains, which can also be captured in a rain barrel or cistern and reused to water your lawn or garden.

**Maintain Septic Systems.** Monitor your tank yearly and have a reputable contractor remove sludge and scum every three to five years to prevent solids from escaping from the absorption system. Fecal matter from malfunctioning septic systems can contaminate beaches.

**Curb Your Pets.** Pick up animal waste when walking your pet and dispose of it in the garbage to reduce animal waste in stormwater runoff. Also, don't litter. Litter often ends up on our beaches.

**Practice Proper Lawn and Garden Care.** Use natural fertilizers such as compost on your garden and minimize the use of chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides. Landscape with native vegetation rather than green grass, which requires fertilizers and herbicides. This can reduce the amount of runoff and pollution.

**Practice Proper Marine and Recreational Boating Waste Disposal.** Dispose of your boat sewage in onshore sanitary facilities. Don't dump sewage or trash overboard. Boating wastes discharged into coastal waters can be a significant cause of high pathogen concentrations.

**Make Sure Infants Wear Swim Diapers and Rubber Pants.** Children not yet toilet trained should be dressed in a swim diaper and rubber pants or similar tight-fitting outer garment. An extra layer of protection in addition to a swim diaper is necessary to help prevent any bacteria from entering the water.

**Learn about the Water Quality at Local Beaches.** Go to NRDC's Web site ([www.nrdc.org](http://www.nrdc.org)) and the EPA's Web site ([www.epa.gov/OST/beaches](http://www.epa.gov/OST/beaches)), both of which have data on beach monitoring and notification policies and on closings and advisories. Also, to show your concern, ask your county or town department of health official: 1) What are the sources of

pollution affecting the waters where you swim? 2) What sort of water quality monitoring is performed at these beaches? 3) Are beaches always closed when monitoring shows that the bacterial standard is exceeded? 4) Are the waters currently closed or open? and 5) What warning signs can you look for?

**Choose Your Beaches Carefully.** Whenever possible, swim at the beaches that your research shows have the cleanest waters or are carefully monitored with strict closure or advisory procedures in effect. Beaches adjacent to open ocean waters and beaches that are removed from urban areas generally pose less of a health risk than do beaches in developed areas or in enclosed bays and harbors with little water circulation. Stay away from beaches with visible discharge pipes, and avoid swimming at urban beaches after a heavy rainfall.

**Clean Up After Yourself at the Beach.** Clean up after yourself if you bring a picnic to the beach. And do not feed the birds or other wildlife. Seagulls and other wildlife are attracted to the garbage and food waste that is often left behind on the beach. Feeding them will only encourage their permanent presence at your beach. The fecal matter left on the beach by the avian and wildlife visitors can contribute to elevated bacteria levels at your beach and cause it to close. Waste from wildlife is one of the three largest-known sources of bacterial pollution. Advocate for your local beach management agency to invest in secure garbage cans with close-fitting lids.

**Wade or Bathe Without Submerging Your Head.** If you believe there is a possibility that a local beach is polluted, do not put your head in the water. If you avoid ingesting beachwater, you will significantly reduce your chance of contracting a pollution-associated illness. Try to keep children from splashing in water you suspect is polluted.

**Support Local, State, and Federal Legislation that Promotes the Cleanup of Pollution Sources.** Write to your representative and senators and let them know you support strong beach legislation and clean water protections. Tell your local government to move forward quickly to address its sewage overflows and stormwater. Make sure you tell officials that you are willing to pay for programs to monitor beaches and reduce runoff pollution.

The Natural Resources Defense Council is a national, non-profit organization of scientists, lawyers and environmental specialists dedicated to protecting public health and the environment. Founded in 1970, NRDC has more than 1.2 million members and online activists nationwide served from offices in New York, Washington, Santa Monica and San Francisco. More information about NRDC is available through its Web site: [www.nrdc.org](http://www.nrdc.org).

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<sup>1</sup> The Earth Works Group, "50 Simple Things You Can Do to Save the Earth," 1989.