

What to do if you become unwell

If you do become unwell with diarrhoea or any other symptoms, seek medical help and let them know you have been open water swimming.

Do not swim again until you have had no diarrhoeal symptoms for 48 hours, unless advised by a doctor that this needs to be for a longer period.

For information on bathing water and beach risks, visit www.hpa.org.uk/Topics/InfectiousDiseases/InfectionsAZ/BathingAndBeaches/

1. www.hpa.org.uk/webc/HPAwebFile/HPAweb_C/1317139088329

Photos courtesy of Human Race



This document is available in other formats on request.

Please call: 020 8327 7018

or email: publications@phe.gov.uk

Public Health England
Wellington House
133-155 Waterloo Road
London SE1 8UG
www.gov.uk/phe
Twitter: @PHE_uk

Publications gateway number 2013109

July 2013

© Crown Copyright 2013

Prepared by South West London
Health Protection Team



Corporate member of
Plain English Campaign
Committed to clearer communication

339



Public Health
England

Swim healthy

How to reduce the risk of illness
when open water swimming



Open water swimming refers to swimming in lakes, rivers and reservoirs. There have been outbreaks of gastrointestinal infections reported associated with open water swimming, the most recent in late 2012 on the River Thames in London¹.



What are the risks?

Open water is not considered to be of bathing quality as it can contain sewage, livestock contamination, and pollution from farming or industry. Anyone can become unwell from swimming in open water as there will always be micro-organisms present. The risk of becoming ill depends on various factors:

- children and novice swimmers are more likely to swallow water accidentally
- those with an impaired immune system are more susceptible to infection
- those swimming in estuarine areas are more likely to contract infections
- heavy rainfall can affect the amount of sewage in rivers due to overflow from drainage systems

Open water swimming can increase the risk of gastrointestinal infections (diarrhoea and/or vomiting) as well as respiratory, skin, ear and eye infections. Most symptoms of these illnesses, for example from organisms such as norovirus, giardia and cryptosporidium, will generally be mild. However, there is also a risk of more severe infections caused by organisms such as *E.coli* O157 which may cause severe gastrointestinal illness and leptospirosis, which can cause liver and kidney problems.

Reducing the risk of illness

Before you swim:

- cover cuts, scratches or sores with a waterproof plaster before swimming
- consider wearing appropriate protective clothing such as a wetsuit, gloves and/or protective footwear

While you are swimming:

- try to avoid swallowing and/or splashing water into your mouth
- observe local safety advice

After swimming:

- ensure you clean your hands thoroughly with soap and water after swimming and before handling/eating food
- thoroughly clean cuts or abrasions using soap and water
- handle your wetsuit with care after use. Rinse it with clean water as soon as is practicable after swimming. Clean with detergent and rinse as advised by the manufacturer. Always wash your hands with soap and water after handling or cleaning your wetsuit. Allow the suit to dry thoroughly before reuse