

06-20-08 Swimmably Safe

Beaches

POW!

Each summer from Memorial Day to Labor Day, beaches and pools, both public and semi public (beach associations) are tested and supervised for safety. Pool supervisors are certified as Pool Operators and oversee the chemistry of the water for antibacterial levels, ph and clarity. They also oversee the safe storage of the chemicals and the functioning of pumps and filters. Your health agent might be a Certified Pool Operator, or your health agent might meet with the CPO to confirm the safety, cleanliness and the record keeping for your public pool.

The safety of the bathing waters is one of numerous unfunded mandates. I think I know how residents feel when they receive an enforcement letter from me stating that something must be fixed or cleaned up. They are told to do and by when to do it. They are not asked how they will accomplish the goal or if they can afford it. For both of us, our responsibility is what surfaces and looks us in the eye. It is what it is and we must take care of it, or go without it.

One of the many responsibilities of your local board of health is to oversee our beaches. For marine water, the indicator organism is Enterococci. Your fresh water beaches are tested for E. coli. The lab tests are fairly inexpensive and are good indicators of the presence of a septic system leaking into the pond or lake. However, septic systems are not the only incubator of or source of bacteria. Wildlife such as geese and ducks and man's best friend do a pretty good job of distributing bacteria from their gut as they happily play at the shore. If your town does not have "animal waste abatement", or better known as "pooper scooper" regulations, talk to your local board of health about the possibility of adopting some. Its time has come. Ridiculed at first as unenforceable, education on this topic has reached the masses and lots of people now take plastic bags along with them when they walk their pooch. Those who don't clean up after their dogs are in the minority and need to get with the program; in this case, a sanitation program that helps our beaches to be clean and safe for swimming.

In addition to the contributions of septic systems and animals, bacteria can also flow into the water from an indirect source. Catch basins are very effective as large Petri dishes, holding and keeping warm anything and everything that flows into them from the street. Dry periods and warm temperatures allow the contents, including bacteria, to sit still and grow. Heavy rains flush out the contents just like flushing a toilet. A plume forms, bringing the bacteria from animals and oils from cars, into the water body.

This is why we are supposed to clean up after our dogs at the roadside, also. You can do this! My grandson, Colin, is only two and "catch basin" is in his everyday vocabulary. We check them out for water level, for oils, trash and whether the water is stagnant or flowing. We also count all pipes and try to figure out which ones flow in and which ones flow out. The catch basins in his neighborhood all have a label urging the reader to "Be True to Our Blue", reminding people that the water in that basin leads to water bodies, which is ultimately our water for swimming and for drinking. We do not have separate bodies of water for drinking that are magically kept pristine. All waters are connected and it is up to us to protect them.

So, each Tuesday morning, all summer long, I step into waders and collect samples of water in pre-labeled jars, to send off to the lab. People have actually volunteered to do this for me, for it looks easy and fun. It might be tempting to accept the offer but I have to be sure that it is done correctly, not too close to the surface and not too close to the bottom. I need to see with my own eyes how clear or how murky the water is.

The containers are kept cold until they reach the lab so that levels of bacteria are kept constant and not allowed to multiply, as in that warm catch basin. Field data is noted: temperature of water and air, wind, days since last rainfall and amount of, presence of weeds, algae, trash, oil and numbers of people and animals. A Chain of Custody is signed by anyone handling the lab samples: collected by and released to, with date and time noted. While it may not be difficult, this is serious stuff, based on scientific principles. All the measures are for a good reason: Protecting Our Waters.

So, people, P.O.W.! or ka-pow from me, in the form of an enforcement letter, fine or ticket! You don't want that, do you?

Cathleen Drinan is the health agent for the Town of Halifax. She will tell you why she wears waders in another column addressing algae. She looks forward to your comments and can be reached at 781 293 6768 or cdrinan@town.halifax.ma.us