

5-29-009 Safe Swimming

It's springtime in New England. We've been walking and gardening and the first mowing delivers the sight of hay drying in the sun and one of the most wonderful smells on earth. About a week later, the exotic Lady Slippers arrive in the pine groves and the scattered sprinkling of the diminutive bluettes grace our lives with their appearance. We are truly blessed in New England with the changes of seasons. They demand our attention and we want more, as we begin taking items out of storage and packing our picnic baskets. We might not even give a thought to the condition of our favorite outdoor spots. Don't we assume they will be there, be open and be ready for use? After all, aren't they natural and isn't nature always ready to receive us?

Nature might be ready but what have people done to nature since you last visited? That is the question. Have you ever left a beach because you were disappointed to find trash and broken glass? Have you ever turned around and left because you could not find a few square feet spared from little piles of dog, duck and geese doo-doo? Actually, those piles are not so little are they?

If we are fortunate enough to safely reach the water's edge, we might see a surface covered in greenish yellow dust. At this time of year it is pollen, not algae. We'll deal with that later on in the summer.

If we can make it to the water's edge and it is not so turbid that it we cannot see bottom, then the clear water lures us in and in we go without a care! Well, we are wearing a hat, life preservers, sun block and insect repellent but we are ready for a relaxing time at and in the water.

All the issues mentioned so far are but a few of many under the jurisdiction of the Department of Community Sanitation at our Massachusetts Department of Public Health. The Minimum Standards For Bathing Beaches, State Sanitary Code, Chapter VII, is found in our Code of Massachusetts Regulations, 105 CMR 445.000. You can check out the whole code at Massachusetts' website for the Department of Public Health. There, we read the purpose is to "protect the health, safety and well-being of the users of bathing beaches, to establish acceptable standards for the operation of bathing water and to establish a procedure for informing the public of any bathing water closures."

Please note the standard required. It is the minimum standard. Local boards of health may add standards and are allowed to make standards stricter but not more lenient. The same is true for other codes in Massachusetts such as those for safe and sanitary housing. They say, "At least do this and at least don't allow that." They do not say, "This is perfect." And they do not claim to have covered every issue. Health agents and boards of health will listen to your concerns if you notice something worrisome at the beaches. In that case, let them know; ask them questions.

Last year, I saw piles of goose droppings, thought for sure to be piles of dog mess left by the same dog, for as the caller said, "You can tell because they are all the same size, shape and color!" I was lucky enough to receive help from people willing to rake up those piles. There's a reason Halifax has Animal Waste Abatement Regulations. Please clean up after your dog and please don't feed the ducks and geese and pigeons.

Last year also brought the first beach closings due to blooms of algae. This is an emerging issue for boards of health, departments of public health, biologists and

epidemiologists. Not only will we be hearing more about this because of health concerns but also because of environmental ones. Stay tuned to that issue and encourage your water's edge friends to avoid fertilizers for the lawn and ask cranberry bog owners if they are following all of the manufacturer's guidance when it comes to the release of fertilized waters back to the ponds from whence they came.

It is time to polish and store my leather health agent shoes and to make sure I have those thigh high boots in my car on Tuesdays. With my boots on and armed with sample bottles, thermometer and chain of custody and field data report papers; I am ready for the first beach report for the summer of 2009.

For health agents, the first water sampling is a springtime rite of passage and an important one, for our findings determine if the beaches are clean enough and safe enough for swimming. Examining our beaches is also a glimpse at water quality conditions in general. If there are high levels of bacteria or oil slicks, what reaches and remains in the groundwater supplying our drinking water?

Protecting ground water is of the utmost importance because all of us depend on private wells, municipal wells or municipal surface water supplies. It's all connected. I want safe springs; not the silent ones, of which Rachel Carson wrote.

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