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Experts can't pin down surge in beach closings

Pollution has plagued all of Lake Michigan, study finds

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Posted: Oct. 29, 2002

More area beaches were closed more often this summer because of high levels of bacterial pollution, and experts can agree on only one thing: They can't definitively say why.

The phenomenon of record-breaking beach closings and swim-at-your-own risk advisories has been felt all around Lake Michigan, according to a study released Monday by the Lake Michigan Federation, a Chicago-based environmentalist group that has tracked closings since 1996.

The dumping of sewage during storms, sea gull droppings, the runoff from roads, the increased testing of beach waters and the low level of the lake have all been cited as possible reasons for the more frequent detection of bacteria in the water.

In Milwaukee, South Shore was closed 50 times this year, compared with 28 times in 2001. The increased closings were even more pronounced at other area beaches - Bradford was closed 21 times, compared with eight a year ago; McKinley was closed 23 times, compared with two last year.

A relatively simple answer may be available for the more frequent closing of beaches in the North Shore. Officials received a grant to test the waters daily, compared with twice a week last year, said Jane Peterson, of the North Shore Health Department.

Atwater in Shorewood was closed 24 times, Klode in Whitefish Bay was closed 41 times and Doctor's in Bayside was closed 20 times, while last year each was closed only four times.

Door County began testing beaches daily after 64 illnesses were reported in mid-July.

Laurel O'Sullivan, the pollution prevention coordinator for the Lake Michigan Federation, said her group's study found that contamination was found 27 times in Door County after testing began but noted that there was nothing to compare the figure with because tests had not been done before.

Tests done are for E. coli, a bacteria found in human and animal waste that can be an indicator that other

disease-causing substances are present. The test may not be the best method for detecting harmful substances, according to some experts.

The dumping of untreated or partially treated sewage has conventionally been believed to be a reason for the presence of E. coli. Most experts agree that it's not the only cause, but one that should be controlled.

"Sewage overflows don't decrease the problem," said Lynn Broaddus, of Friends of Milwaukee's Rivers. "But it's a cause we can control by just improving management of the sewer system."

Paul Biedrzycki, manager of disease control and prevention for the City of Milwaukee Health Department, said one problem with the tests now done daily is that it takes 24 hours to get the results. That resulted in the beaches being open about 25% of the time when they should have been closed.

Biedrzycki said a new testing procedure used at the often-contaminated South Shore Beach took into account a number of variables, including wind speed, water temperature and turbidity. Those tests were less expensive and more accurate, he said. That's prompting him to propose using that procedure exclusively for South Shore next summer.

But the same test might not work for the other beaches because those beaches have different conditions.

"Clearly it's an enigma," Biedrzycki said of the causes of the pollution. "We have not been able to explain it based on one or two factors. It's a dynamic we have a lot to learn about."

Sandra McLellan, a researcher for the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's Great Lakes WATER Institute, has studied the problems at South Shore and has attributed much of the problem at that beach to the sea gull droppings. But she said pollution doesn't migrate far, meaning that the pollution could be just a pocket and not contaminating a broad area.

A bigger surprise she's found has been in the substances that wash into the rivers and lake through storm sewers, the sewers designed to carry rainwater. She said she's found storm sewer E. coli counts in the millions of colonies per 100 milliliters. Beaches are closed when a sample indicates 235 colonies per 100 milliliters.

"We've really been surprised at how high the levels are," McLellan said. "Some of these outflows are along the bluff (over the beach)."

Val Klump, director of the WATER Institute, said the Department of Natural Resources recognizes the problem and has implemented rules that will require communities to clean up the runoff over the next decade.

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From the Oct. 29, 2002 editions of the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel
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