

CHECK BEFORE YOU GO

Water quality and sewage risk when your child is swimming or playing near water
A guide for parents and carers

Heather Preen was a healthy, happy eight-year-old girl. In August 1999, while on a family holiday in Devon, she came home from the beach one day and suddenly became very ill with diarrhoea. A week later, on 8th August 1999, Heather died. The cause of her death was Haemolytic Uraemic Syndrome, which developed from an E. coli O157 (VTEC) infection.

The exact source of Heather's infection will never be known for certain. But the coroner said that because no environmental source was ruled out, all possible sources, including contact with raw sewage, needed to be considered and addressed.

Heather's mother, Julie Maughan, has campaigned ever since so that no other family goes through what hers did. This guide, produced with Julie, is here to help you understand the risk and know what to check before your child goes swimming or plays in rivers, lakes or the sea.

Current guidance for school trips (OEAP National Guidance) covers drowning, currents and tides, but does not specifically name sewage or E. coli as a risk to check for. This guide fills that gap for parents and carers.

Why this matters

Sewage pollution in UK rivers and coastal waters is a significant and growing public health risk. E. coli and other pathogens from sewage can cause serious illness and, in rare cases, death. Children and young people are among the most vulnerable.

Whether it's a school trip, a club activity, or a family day out, it's worth checking water quality before your child goes in or near the water, in the same way you might check the weather.

What to check before you go

1	Check the SSRS app before confirming plans The Safer Seas and Rivers Service (SSRS), from Surfers Against Sewage, gives real-time water quality data for UK coastal and inland sites. Download the free SSRS app and search the site your child will be visiting.
2	Know the specific site Water quality varies a lot between different beaches, rivers and lakes, and can change from day to day. Somewhere that was fine last summer, or last week, may not be fine today. If it's a recognised 'bathing water', the app will show you its current status. If the status is 'poor', children should not swim there.
3	Remember contact doesn't mean swimming

	Even paddling, rock-pooling or playing near the water's edge can be enough for an E. coli infection. Full immersion isn't necessary, so it's worth checking water quality even for trips where swimming isn't planned.
4	Check again on the day Conditions can change quickly. Check the app again on the morning you're heading out. Heavy rainfall in the previous 48 hours significantly increases the risk of sewage overflows, so if in doubt, consider changing your plans.
5	Wash hands and cover cuts After any contact with sea, river or lake water, make sure your child washes their hands, especially before eating. Cover any cuts or grazes with a waterproof plaster before water contact, and avoid swallowing water.
6	Know the signs to watch for If your child develops diarrhoea, vomiting or stomach cramps after being in or near water, contact your GP or NHS 111 and mention the possible water contact. Seek urgent medical help if symptoms are severe, such as bloody diarrhoea, or if your child seems seriously unwell.

The SSRS: your go-to tool

What it tells you	How to use it
Real-time pollution alerts for your favourite beaches, rivers and lakes in the UK. Updated daily and after rainfall events.	Download the free SSRS app. Search your destination site. Check the rating and any active pollution alerts before confirming a visit, and again on the day.

Every child deserves to enjoy the water safely

We all know outdoor water activities are wonderful for children: building strength, boosting confidence, and creating shared memories with family and friends. Julie has a wealth of photographs of Heather doing exactly these things, both on family holidays and on residential trips with her school and the Girlguiding Brownie group she loved. Julie's hope, and ours, is simply that families check before they go, so that children can keep enjoying the water safely.

This guide was produced by Surfers Against Sewage in partnership with Julie Maughan, mother of Heather Preen, who died from E. coli contracted through sewage pollution in 1999. For more information, visit sas.org.uk or contact education@sas.org.uk.