



# Beach Health

2013 Educational Campaign

## Project Background

Ottawa County Department of Public Health (OCDPH) has worked on a Beach Health campaign with the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative. Support for this project has been provided by the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality, Water Resource Division Grant Program, under Award No. 2011-7211. OCDPH created a communications and marketing plan to promote and increase awareness among residents, tourists, and all other beach goers on preventive steps to reduce recreational water illnesses. In addition, this project highlighted and directed the public to the OCDPH Beach Watch program, which tests 16 public beaches throughout the summer for E. coli levels. More information on this campaign can be found at [www.miottawa.org/beachwatch](http://www.miottawa.org/beachwatch).

### **Our key message on recreational water illness prevention**

- Do not feed the birds
- Keep pets off the beach
- Use the restroom before swimming
- Do not swallow lake water
- Wash your hands with soap and water before eating
- Do not swim in water that smells foul
- Shower when you return home
- Avoid swimming immediately after heavy rainfall

*Contributes to a positive outcome in the health status of community residents.*

Public Health officials are concerned with water recreational illnesses to keep our communities healthy and safe. Ottawa County has beautiful beaches! However, natural bodies of water contain microorganisms regardless of how clean or clear the waters look. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), germs that cause recreational water illnesses are spread by swallowing, breathing in the mists or aerosols from, or having contact with contaminated water in swimming pools, water parks, hot tubs, interactive fountains, water play areas, lakes, rivers, or oceans. Contaminates include rain and agricultural runoff, animal excrements, and faulty septic systems. Ottawa County Department of Public Health implemented the Beach Health campaign to encourage community residents to take preventive steps and minimize health risks.

*Demonstrates a spirit of collaboration and resource sharing.*

The Beach Watch water testing program has been on-going for several years. Our most recent educational Beach Health campaign started in April, 2013 and continues to be promoted throughout Ottawa County and other regions to-date. This project has been made possible by collaboration with K-12 Ottawa County schools, Grand Haven and Holland State Parks, West Coast Chamber of Commerce, Michigan DOT Welcome Centers, BeachNet iServe, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Health Promotions, University of Michigan Center of Excellence for Great Lakes and Human Health, Marquette County Health Department, Niagara Region Public Health, and many other partners who helped promote Beach Health to the public.

Our partners also helped distribute marketing materials, such as 4" x 9" rack cards, 11" x 17" posters, and promotional products (can coolies and beach pails with shovels). Several Beach Health public service announcements were provided by WHTC radio station, WOOD radio news, WoodTV8 and editorials by West Michigan Woman Magazine, Michigan State University's Great Lakes Echo, Detroit Free Press, and the Holland Sentinel. In addition, resources were allocated for paid advertising to On-the-Town Magazine (June-Summer Fun Guide and July-Gas Tank Away issues), Lakeshore Urban St. Magazine (Summer Kick-off and Mid-summer issues), Grand Rapids Family Magazine (Summer Activity Guide issue), Holland Max Bus interior billboards, and Grand Haven Harbor Transit trolley and bus interior billboards.

*Demonstrates the use of the best available evidence in making informed public health decisions to ensure the effectiveness of processes, programs, and interventions.*

According to the CDC, in the past two decades, there has been a substantial increase in the number of recreational water illness outbreaks associated with swimming. In order for OCDPH to address this outbreak issue and make the best informed public health decision, our Department re-

evaluated our Beach Watch water testing program. The time lapse (of at least 24 hours) between water sampling and the test result postings of those samples was a challenge to ensure timely and accurate information to the public. After collecting data, our research showed that the surges in E. coli are short lived. In addition, we found that in 99% of instances, the day that an advisory was issued, the beach water was actually below the "300 E. coli per 100 milliliters of water" threshold. Our Department knew the results were from water collected on the prior day and at the same time, felt a civic responsibility to issue an advisory for the purposes of protecting public health. Evidence from our research guided our Department to develop a more efficient and effective process. OCDPH is no longer issuing outdated and inaccurate advisories. Test results are still posted online ([www.miOttawa.org/beachwatch](http://www.miOttawa.org/beachwatch)) so the public can make informed decisions about water quality. In addition, we have centralized our focus for beach health on communicating messages that increase awareness and prevention of recreational water illnesses, based on CDC and OCDPH research.

*Is sustainable and replicable in other communities.*

Recreational water illnesses are a health concern for any community. The Beach Health campaign project has clear messaging and marketing materials, which can be replicated by any organization. Elements of the campaign have already been adopted by the University of Michigan Center of Excellence for Great Lakes and Human Health, Marquette County Health Department, Niagara Region Public Health, and several others.

*Demonstrates a new or innovative public health program or initiative.*

Example promotional education materials available at [www.miOttawa.org/beachwatch](http://www.miOttawa.org/beachwatch)