

## **E. coli in the American River FAQ**

### **What we know**

- Every lake, stream or river can have bacteria – including E. coli, which is found in the intestines of mammals – from wildlife to humans
- Most E. coli strains are harmless and do not cause human illness
- The State’s Central Valley Water Board is conducting a yearlong study to help determine the source of E. coli in the Lower American River.
- Because bacteria can be in any public waterway, everyone should:
  - Not drink recreational water or use the water for cooking.
  - Wash your hands or shower after swimming.
  - Not enter the water if you have cuts or open sores, as these are pathways for bacteria to enter your body.

### **What we don’t know**

- At this time, the levels of E.coli in other central valley lakes, streams and rivers are unknown because the State’s Central Valley Water Board doesn’t have the same monitoring program elsewhere that is employed for the Lower American River (hence the promotion of healthy swimming habits)
- The State’s Central Valley Water Board does not know the sources of the E. coli, and therefore do not know if the strains in the Lower American River are dangerous and causes human illness

### **What is E.coli?**

Escherichia coli (E. coli) are bacteria that live in the intestines of people and animals. Most E. coli are harmless and actually are an important part of a healthy human intestinal tract.

There are hundreds of different strains of E.coli and only a few of them are causes of disease. Some E. coli strains are pathogenic, meaning they can cause illness, either diarrhea or illness outside of the intestinal tract. The types of E. coli that can cause diarrhea can be transmitted through contaminated water or food, or through contact with animals or persons.

### **What type of E. coli strain can make me sick?**

Shiga toxin-producing E. coli (STEC) make toxins that can cause severe illness. STEC is commonly heard about in the news in association with foodborne outbreaks.

### **Was this toxic strain of E. coli found in the American River?**

E. coli are generally found in all recreational waters. Because of this, additional testing must be conducted by the Central Valley Regional Water Board to determine the source of E. coli (human, mammal, and/or water fowl). This testing will only identify the source not the strain.

## **What can a person do to prevent an E. coli infection?**

Things you can do to reduce the risk of STEC infection include:

### Proper Cooking

- Do not eat undercooked meat. Cook ground beef to an internal temperature of at least 160 F. Check the temperature of the meat with a food thermometer.
- Do not drink unpasteurized (raw) milk, juice and cider.

### Avoid drinking untreated water

- Don't drink or swallow water from rivers, streams, lakes, or pools.
- Untreated water should be boiled before use.

### Hand washing

- All family members should wash their hands with warm, soapy water after using the toilet, changing diapers, handling animals, and before preparing or handling food or drinks.

### Recreate Safely

- Wash your hands and/or shower after swimming.
- Do not enter the water if you have cuts or open sores, as these are pathways for bacteria to enter your body.
- Avoid algae blooms (brightly colored water) and trash in the water.
- Pay attention and follow any warning signs and postings. Do not access a water body if posted warnings indicate it is not safe to do so.
- Contact your healthcare provider if you have concerns regarding your health after swimming in recreational waters.

## **What is Sacramento County Public Health doing about E. coli?**

E.coli is a Title 17 reportable disease. Medical providers and labs are required by law to report cases to local public health officials. **To date, there have been no water-related E. coli illness cases from our rivers and streams reported to Sacramento County Public Health.**

Public health infectious disease investigators investigate every reported case of E. coli-related illness to identify the source and stop the spread of the disease. Investigators notify those who may be at risk; this typically includes close contacts. If public health officials decide there is a risk to the general public, a public notification is sent out.

The Public Health Officer has local authority in determining if a recreational area needs to be closed. An example would be if there was a known communicable disease outbreak or a known sewage release, the Public Health Officer would be consulted to make this determination.

**For more information call Sacramento County Public Health 916-875-5881.**