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Bacteria concerns spur swim advisories

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Lake and Cuyahoga County residents who planned to spend time at the beach may have to hold off until the weekend because of higher-than-normal bacteria levels.

Tuesday's rainstorms led to sewage overflows in Lake Erie. The Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District issued swimming advisories on Wednesday, expecting unsafe levels of bacteria for all three beaches the district watches in Cuyahoga County: Huntington, Edgewater and Villa Angela.

Lake Metroparks officials posted notices at all access points to its Fairport Harbor Lakefront Park Beach because water samples tested positive for blue-green algae.

Algae at the beach is normal during warm periods, especially in the summer, but this particular algae can produce bacteria that could harm humans and animals. The green film of algae looks like spilled paint and can be seen floating on the surface of the water.

Paul Palagyi, interim executive director of Lake Metroparks, said workers from the Lake County Health Department tested the water Monday and when blue-green algae was detected, they asked the park system to alert the public.

Palagyi said the park discourages children and seniors and those who have immune system complications from coming into contact with the water while additional tests are run. He said those tests would be completed by Friday.

Ohio requires that warnings be posted whenever water levels exceed 400,000 cell count per milliliter, Palagyi said. The water tested at Fairport Harbor exceeded 800,000 cell count per milliliter earlier this week.

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"Nothing is dangerous with the algae, it is a question if the bacteria within the algae might produce toxins," Palagyi said.

Test results should also be available by Friday on water samples taken from Headlands Beach State Park in Mentor, Bethany McCorkle, spokeswoman for the Ohio Department of Natural Resources, said Wednesday.

The Lake County health district, which monitors water quality at the state beach, took

samples this week to check for algae, she said. That beach, like others in the state park system, has signs with photographs showing algae blooms and asking visitors to call if they suspect algae in the water. No advisories have been posted there, she said.

Last July more than 87,000 people visited the Fairport Harbor beach, Palagyi said. He said he expects thousands of guests to visit Lake Metroparks during the holiday weekend.

Jeff Reutter, who directs the Ohio Sea Grant office at The Ohio State University, said blooms occur when the water temperature is warm and when there is a high level of phosphorus.

He said the phosphorus could have come from agriculture but it is most likely the result of sewage that entered the lake. Reutter said blooms in the western basin of Lake Erie are normal and could last for months, but blooms in the east are unusual.

"The bloom will eventually go away, but I would not swim in the water if there is blue-green algae present," Reutter said. Organisms produced in the algae have some of the most "poisonous" toxins known to humans, he said.

"We want people to minimize the risk, and the best way is to not get in the water," Graham said. For more information on algae blooms and lake water advisories, visit ohioideinfo.com.

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