Protecting Health Through Safe Recreational Water

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Recommendations

It is recommended that the Board of Health receive this report for information.

Key Points

- Safe recreational water is a public health priority: these settings support physical activity, social connection, and access to cooling during hot weather, while also requiring monitoring to prevent illness, injury, and exposure to environmental hazards.
- Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health (WDG Public Health) protects residents and visitors through inspections, monitoring, risk assessment, operator education, and complaint response for public pools, spas, beaches, waterfront areas at overnight recreational camps, and Class C recreational water facilities such as public wading pools, spray pads, splash pads, and water slide receiving basins.
- Climate change is making this work more urgent by increasing risks related to harmful algal blooms, changing beach water quality, extreme weather impacts, and greater reliance on recreational water settings during heat events.
- WDG Public Health works with municipal partners and the Grand River Conservation Authority (GRCA) to support recreational water safety, timely information-sharing, and public notification when water quality concerns arise.
- Program data, inspection information, beach monitoring results, complaint trends, and environmental indicators will continue to inform risk-based planning and climate resilience across WDG.

Background

Recreational water settings are more than places to swim; they are community assets that support health, connection, and cooling during extreme heat. In WDG, public pools, spas, Class C recreational water facilities, beaches, and waterfront areas at overnight recreational camps provide opportunities for physical activity, recreation, social connection, and relief from hot weather. These benefits depend on facilities and natural water settings being properly operated, monitored, and communicated to the public in ways that reduce the risk of illness, injury, and exposure to environmental hazards.

Boards of health in Ontario have responsibilities related to recreational water under the Ontario Public Health Standards and related protocols and regulations. The Ministry of Health's Recreational Water Protocol directs boards of health to support the prevention and reduction of water-borne illness and injury through surveillance, inspection, investigation, response to complaints and adverse events, operator education, and public communication.[1] Ontario's Public Pools Regulation sets requirements for public pools, spas, and Class C facilities, including public wading pools, public spray pads or public splash pads, water slide receiving basins, and related recreational water settings.[2]

WDG Public Health is involved in recreational water safety through routine inspections, water quality monitoring, risk assessment, complaint response, operator education, and public notification. These activities support compliance with applicable public health requirements and help residents make informed decisions about recreational water use.

This report outlines WDG Public Health's recreational water program, including inspection and monitoring activities, climate-related risks, and opportunities to strengthen public health protection and climate resilience in response to emerging environmental pressures such as warming temperatures, extreme weather, harmful algal blooms, changing water quality, and increased reliance on recreational water settings during heat events.

Discussion

Program Overview

WDG Public Health's recreational water program protects residents and visitors by supporting safe operation and use of regulated and monitored recreational water settings. The program's mandate includes inspection, water quality monitoring, risk assessment, complaint response, operator education, follow-up with owners and operators, and public notification when risks are identified. Together, these activities help prevent waterborne illness, reduce injury risk, support safe recreation, and maintain public confidence in local recreational water settings.[1-3]

Inspection and Monitoring Activities

Public pools and spas: WDG Public Health conducts inspections to assess compliance with requirements related to water chemistry, disinfection, filtration, safety equipment, supervision, signage, record keeping, and operational practices. In 2026, WDG Public Health's recreational water program included 94 public pool and spa premises, with 203 inspections completed to date. In 2025, the program included 95 public pool and spa premises, with 279 total inspections completed. These inspections are a frontline public health activity because they identify and address conditions that could contribute to illness, injury, or unsafe use before they affect the public.

Class C recreational water facilities: Inspections of Class C recreational water facilities, including public wading pools, public spray pads or public splash pads, and water slide receiving basins, focus on water treatment, signage, safety, and operating practices that help reduce risk for users. In 2026, WDG Public Health's recreational water program included 33 Class C recreational water facilities, and all 33 were inspected. These numbers remain unchanged from 2025. Annual inspection volumes for these facilities provide additional insight into program workload and community access to cooling and recreation.

Beaches: Public beaches in WDG are operated by the GRCA. WDG Public Health works closely with the GRCA to support recreational water safety through information sharing, risk assessment, partner communication and public notification when concerns are identified (Figure 1).

Public Health Protection

Public health protection is the central purpose of this program. Recreational water settings can present risks related to waterborne illness, chemical exposure, injury, and changing environmental conditions. WDG Public Health reduces these risks through inspection, water quality monitoring, risk assessment, complaint response, operator education, and public notification. Public health inspectors also have authority under Section 13 of the *Health Protection and Promotion Act* to issue a closure order when conditions create a public health hazard, helping prevent exposure and protect the health of the residents and visitors. This work supports safe access to recreation and cooling and helps residents make informed decisions about when and where recreational water can be used safely.



Figure 1. WDG Public Health supports the GRCA with signage development and guidance on human health risk communication to alert beach users to general beach conditions (including bacterial contamination), and to blue-green algae health impacts, and will continue to adapt and evolve messaging and notification as circumstances change.

Partnerships

Collaboration with municipal partners and the GRCA supports timely information-sharing, operational follow-up, and public notification when water quality concerns or other recreational water risks are identified.

Recreational Water and Community Well-Being

Pools, Class C recreational water facilities including public wading pools, public spray pads or public splash pads, and water slide receiving basins, beaches, including waterfront areas at overnight recreational camps, support recreation, physical activity, social connection, and access to cooling during extreme heat. These settings are important community assets, particularly when safe and accessible options for cooling and outdoor activity are needed.

Climate Change Impacts

Climate change is expected to make recreational water safety more complex and more noticeable to the public. Warmer temperatures and longer periods of hot weather may extend the recreational water season and increase use of beaches, lakes, and other natural water bodies in WDG.[4] These warmer conditions may also increase the likelihood, frequency, and duration of harmful algal blooms, including blue-green algae. More frequent extreme rainfall can

wash bacteria, nutrients, and other contaminants into recreational waters through stormwater and agricultural runoff. This can affect water quality and lead to temporary restrictions on recreational water use.

Beaches and other recreational water bodies provide important opportunities for physical activity, social connection and relief from extreme heat. Maintaining access to these spaces must be balanced with protecting people from water-related health risks. In a changing climate, this requires ongoing monitoring, clear and timely communication, coordinated planning with partners like the GRCA, and regular review of environmental and program trends to identify emerging risks and adapt public health practices.

WDG Public Health will take a proactive and adaptive approach to mitigating climate change impacts on recreational water by:

- working with conservation authorities, municipalities and recreational water operators to identify and respond to emerging concerns
- monitoring trends in bloom activity, water quality concerns and climate-related risks
- regularly reassessing public health practices as local conditions, evidence and climate projections evolve
- providing timely, location-specific public communication that helps residents understand changing recreational water risks and make informed decisions about when and where recreational water can be used safely

Health Equity Implications

Access to safe recreational water is an important health equity consideration. Public pools, beaches, waterfront areas at overnight recreational camps, and Class C recreational water facilities, such as public wading pools, spray pads, splash pads, and water slide receiving basins, can be particularly important for children, families, older adults, low-income residents, people without private cooling options, and rural residents who may face transportation or service access barriers. During heat events, publicly accessible recreational water settings can support cooling and reduce heat-related health risks.

Potential barriers include uneven geographic access to recreational water settings, differences in awareness of beach postings or advisories, language and communication barriers, and the cost or accessibility of some facilities. WDG Public Health can help mitigate these barriers by supporting clear public communication, working with partners on timely notification, considering plain-language and accessible messaging, and using local data to identify where risks or access gaps may be greater.

Conclusion

Safe recreational water protects health while supporting the places residents rely on for recreation, connection, and cooling. WDG Public Health's recreational water program protects health through inspection, water quality monitoring, risk assessment, public notification, operator support, and collaboration with municipal and conservation authority partners.

Climate change is expected to increase the importance of this work by affecting water quality, contributing to harmful algal bloom conditions, and increasing reliance on recreational water settings during hot weather. Continued use of program data and partner collaboration will help WDG Public Health strengthen public communication, identify emerging risks, and support safe and equitable recreational water use across WDG.

Ontario Public Health Standards

Foundational Standards

☒ Population Health Assessment

☒ Health Equity

☒ Effective Public Health Practice

☐ Emergency Management

Program Standards

☐ Chronic Disease Prevention and Well-Being

☒ Food Safety

☒ Healthy Environments

☐ Healthy Growth and Development

☐ Immunization

☒ Infectious and Communicable Diseases Prevention and Control

☒ Safe Water

☐ School Health

☐ Substance Use and Injury Prevention

2024-2028 WDGPH Strategic Goals

More details about these strategic goals can be found in WDGPH's 2024-2028 Strategic Plan.

☒ Improve health outcomes

☐ Focus on children's health

☒ Build strong partnerships

☒ Innovate our programs and services

☒ Lead the way toward a sustainable Public Health system

References

1. Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care. *Recreational Water Protocol, 2019*. Toronto: Queen's Printer for Ontario; 2019.
2. Ontario. *R.R.O. 1990, Regulation 565: Public Pools*. Toronto: King's Printer for Ontario; current to 2026.
3. Ontario Ministry of Health. *Recreational Water Reference Document, 2025*. Toronto: King's Printer for Ontario; 2025.
4. Buse C, Brubacher J, Lapp H, Jackson E, Wilson R, Toews J, Cheyne B, Bevis B, Komorowski C, Zentner S, Folkema A, Trotz-Williams L. *Climate Change and Health Vulnerability Assessment for Waterloo Region, Wellington County, Dufferin County, and the City of Guelph*. Waterloo and Guelph, ON: Region of Waterloo Public Health and Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health Unit; 2022.