# Health risks linked to sewage spills in Scotland's waterways



A report detailing serious health impacts for nearly 2,000 Scots has surfaced, linking illnesses to the use of the nation’s waterways for recreational activities, including swimming and surfing. The findings, released by the campaign group Surfers Against Sewage, highlight a substantial increase in sewage spills into natural bodies of water, which have resulted in numerous health issues among users.

In 2024, Scottish Water disclosed that sewage was discharged into rivers, seas, and lochs a staggering 24,000 times. Surfers Against Sewage contends that these statistics reflect only a small fraction—6.7 per cent—of the entire sewer network, estimating the real number of sewage spills could potentially reach up to 365,000. This alarming situation has prompted criticism from the organisation, with concerns that Scottish Water has the highest discharge rate of any water company in the UK.

Giles Bristow, CEO of Surfers Against Sewage, expressed his discontent regarding the current state of water safety. "These sewage figures are appalling, and yet they are likely just the tip of the fatberg, due to Scottish Water’s reckless approach to monitoring and public safety," he stated. He emphasised the beauty of Scotland’s coastline and waterways but stressed that such natural splendour is compromised by ongoing pollution. "With no legal requirement to issue sewage alerts in Scotland, water users have no idea whether or not it’s safe to enter the water," he added.

Among those affected is Shelley Sim, a carer from East Lothian, who suffered severe gastroenteritis and dehydration after participating in a wild swim for a friend's birthday. Following her hospital stay, she was diagnosed with cryptosporidium, a diarrheal disease commonly linked to swimming in contaminated waters. Sim shared her experiences, stating, "I’m no longer swimming every day, and I’m more cautious about getting into the water... The first thing I do now is check outfalls… it comes from a place of fear."

The sickness figures reported by Surfers Against Sewage likely underrepresent the true scale of health issues linked to polluted waters. They noted that the cumulative number of sick days attributed to water contamination equates to approximately nine years' worth, creating significant concern for public health safety.

Despite these alarming statistics, the group lamented the absence of a system similar to the Safer Seas and Rivers Service that operates in England and Wales, which provides real-time sewage alerts to the public, leaving Scottish water users at considerable risk.

Bristow concluded: “Scottish Water's inaction will mean the Scottish map will remain blank this year, with surfers and swimmers gambling with their health each time they dive in. Scottish Water: You’re polluting your incredible wild waters and leaving the public in the dark, and at risk. It’s time to step up and provide real-time sewage alerts and dramatically improve your woefully inadequate monitoring."

In response, Professor Simon Parsons, Director of Environment, Planning and Assurance at Scottish Water, maintained that the quality of Scotland’s water environment remains high, with 87 per cent of water bodies classified as good or better. He added that the water utility continues to invest in infrastructure improvements, having spent £500 million recently in addition to £2 billion in the past decade. He affirmed, “Our waste water treatment systems handle more than 1 billion litres of waste water every day and are a vital part of the water cycle in Scotland.”

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://environmentalstandards.scot/our-work/our-analytical-work/storm-overflows-an-assessment-of-spills-their-impact-on-the-water-environment-and-the-effectiveness-of-legislation-and-policy/> - This URL supports the claim about the high frequency of sewage spills and the need for improved monitoring and regulatory guidance. It highlights Environmental Standards Scotland's work on storm overflows and their impact.
* <https://www.ercs.scot/news/lunchtime-101-sewage-pollution/> - This URL provides context about the lack of transparency and insufficient enforcement of environmental regulations concerning sewage pollution in Scotland, aligning with concerns raised by Surfers Against Sewage.
* <https://www.watermagazine.co.uk/2024/09/04/a-new-report-by-environmental-standards-scotland-finds-action-needs-to-be-taken-to-improve-scotlands-storm-overflows/> - This URL supports the information about the need for action on storm overflows and the lack of comprehensive data on their environmental impact in Scotland.
* <https://envirotecmagazine.com/2024/12/12/scottish-water-served-6000-civil-penalty-for-polluting-dunfermline-burn/> - This URL provides evidence of Scottish Water's legal issues related to pollution, supporting the criticism of their handling of sewage disposal.
* <https://www.gov.scot/publications/water-wastewater-drainage-consultation-analysis-report/> - This URL highlights policy proposals and public responses to managing water and wastewater, which aligns with the broader context of improving infrastructure and regulations.