# Holidaymaker's lung abscess highlights concerns over sewage discharges in Welsh waters



A holidaymaker visiting Aberystwyth beach in Wales experienced severe health complications after an accident involving seawater ingestion. Ian Gowan, a resident of Kidderminster, fell into the sea in April 2023 while walking his dog along the seafront, swallowing approximately four mouthfuls of seawater during the incident. This incident ultimately led to the development of a lung abscess, requiring intensive medical treatment.

Mr Gowan recounted the accident to BBC Radio Wales, explaining, "I lost my balance while walking my dog on Aberystwyth beach and fell into the sea. I initially struggled to get up, and someone walking past helped me, but I'd ingested about four mouthfuls of water into my lungs. I didn't think anything of it, carried on with our holiday, and two weeks later I developed a chest infection." Initially, he sought medical advice through his GP and was prescribed antibiotics on multiple occasions as the chest infection persisted and returned several times. After repeated visits, a GP detected an abnormality in his left lung, prompting urgent diagnostics.

An X-ray revealed a soft mass the size of a tennis ball filled with pus, leading to a diagnosis of a lung abscess accompanied by sepsis. Mr Gowan was admitted to the high dependency unit at Worcester Royal Infirmary, where he underwent intravenous antibiotic treatment for five days. Following discharge, he continued intravenous therapy at home for ten days, followed by a month of oral antibiotics.

Although the abscess has since resolved, Mr Gowan has been left with permanent scarring on his lungs and diminished respiratory capacity. This has notably impacted his lifestyle, including the inability to continue playing the tuba as part of his involvement in a brass band. He also lost four weeks’ wages due to his illness. Reflecting on his condition, he said, "I was told by my consultant 'something has got into your lungs to cause this and the only thing it could have been was the sea water in Aberystwyth.’"

Mr Gowan's experience has highlighted concerns about the quality of bathing waters in Wales, particularly regarding the discharge of sewage into waterways. Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water, the not-for-profit water service provider operating across Wales, reported that in 2024 there were 118,276 sewage discharges—an average of more than one every five minutes—representing the highest number of confirmed discharges among UK water companies. Collectively, these discharges lasted for 968,340 hours over the year.

A spokeswoman for Dŵr Cymru explained that Wales operates over 2,300 storm overflows, a notably large number given the country's relatively small population. She noted, "Many of our rural communities are served by smaller sewerage networks and storm overflows, which are essential to ensure networks do not become overwhelmed and flood properties." She further stated that Wales experiences some of the highest rainfall levels in the UK, leading to frequent sewer system capacity issues and consequent spills.

Despite these challenges, Wales maintains some of the best bathing water quality in the UK, with 44% of rivers in Wales classified as having good ecological status compared to 14% in England. Dŵr Cymru announced plans to invest £2.5 billion over the next five years in environmental projects, including £889 million focused on investigating and improving storm overflows.

However, the water company's targets for reducing sewage discharges have faced criticism from environmental campaign group Surfers Against Sewage (SAS). The group argues that Dŵr Cymru’s ambition to reduce discharges to 30 incidents per combined sewer overflow by 2030 falls short of the average UK water provider target of 21 incidents. SAS described the target as "truly unacceptable" and warned that it could result in residents in Wales remaining at higher risk of sewage contamination than those in other regions well into the next decade. The group also criticised Welsh regulators for insufficiently holding Dŵr Cymru to account for water quality standards.

This incident involving Mr Gowan underscores the potential health risks linked to exposure to certain coastal waters, particularly in contexts where sewage discharge events are frequent. The regional water company and environmental groups continue to debate strategies for balancing infrastructure challenges with public health and environmental protection in Wales.

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

## References

* <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/environment-agency-sewage-works> - This URL supports the discussion on sewage discharges and environmental challenges related to water quality in the UK, which could be relevant to Wales.
* <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/lung-abscess/> - This URL provides information about lung abscesses, which corroborates Mr Gowan's medical condition and treatment.
* <https://www.sas.org.uk> - The website of Surfers Against Sewage supports the criticism mentioned regarding water quality and the ambitions to reduce sewage discharges in Wales.
* <https://www.dwrcymru.com> - The Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water website provides information about the company's operations and efforts to address environmental challenges, supporting the discussion on sewage discharges.
* <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/water-quality-challenges-in-england-and-wales> - This government website offers data on water quality challenges in England and Wales, including ecological status and sewage discharges, supporting the broader context of water quality concerns.