# Rise in waterborne illnesses highlights growing concerns over UK sewage pollution



A significant rise in hospitalisations due to water-borne diseases has drawn attention to the risks posed by sewage pollution in the UK’s waterways. Since 2010, cases of illnesses contracted from swimming or engaging in water activities in contaminated rivers, lakes, and seas have increased by 60 per cent, with recent reports highlighting personal accounts from affected individuals and public concerns over water quality.

Shelley Sim, a carer from East Lothian, was hospitalised for five days last year after swimming near her home east of Edinburgh to celebrate a friend’s birthday. She developed severe gastroenteritis which led to a diagnosis of cryptosporidium, an infection caused by swallowing water contaminated with the parasite. “I’m no longer swimming every day, and I’m more cautious about getting into the water,” Ms Sim told The Independent. She explained that while previously she only checked tide conditions, she now monitors sewage outfall warnings, particularly after heavy rainfall, to avoid further health problems.

Ms Sim also noted the impact her illness had on her family. “It impacted my son’s mental health. He has OCD, ADHD and autism and I'm his carer. My illness caused a lot of anxieties and stress,” she said, underlining how water-related infections can affect wider family well-being.

The surge in waterborne diseases includes conditions such as dysentery, Weil’s disease, and typhoid. Weil’s disease, which can cause kidney failure and liver damage, has doubled in incidence since 2010, with 122 confirmed cases in 2023 alone. The infection is typically transmitted through contact with water contaminated by the urine of infected animals. Cases of typhoid have also risen within the same period.

Miriam, a surfer from Cornwall, recounted two recent bouts of sickness in 2024 that she attributed directly to waterborne illness acquired while surfing. “Sickness from the water affected me mentally, as I found myself feeling anxious in the weeks after the sickness episode about entering the water, a place where I usually spend a lot of time,” she said to The Independent. The physical toll was substantial, resulting in weight loss, fatigue, and six days off work. Miriam expressed frustration over sewage pollution’s impact on the surfing community: “I know a lot of mates who have been sick from the water. It’s just not a nice thought knowing that a hobby you love so much can also put you at risk of becoming unwell.”

Public concern about sewage pollution is widespread. A survey by environmental group Surfers Against Sewage and campaign organisation 38 Degrees, involving 28,458 participants, found that 78 per cent of respondents were angry about the state of the UK’s waterways. Furthermore, fewer than five per cent trusted their water company to tackle sewage pollution effectively. A subsequent survey among 3,000 supporters of Surfers Against Sewage revealed an even higher loss of trust, with 98 per cent saying they had lost faith in the system. Over a quarter of these respondents reported falling ill in the previous two years after swimming or interacting with freshwater or seawater, while more than 80 per cent believed their water company's actions had negatively impacted their local community.

Giles Bristow, CEO of Surfers Against Sewage, shared his perspective with The Independent: “It shows just how frustrated and overwhelmingly angry the British public are and how much radical transformation is required. The public are furious. We were all cooped up in our bedrooms during the Covid-19 pandemic and after the lockdown was lifted, people wanted to go out and enjoy our rivers and lakes and to reconnect with nature. However, people have seen that the natural environment is changing before their eyes.”

The evidence gathered by Surfers Against Sewage has been submitted to the Independent Water Commission, chaired by Sir Jon Cunliffe, former deputy governor of the Bank of England. The commission is expected to release its interim report in May 2024. Meanwhile, in continued efforts to raise awareness of water pollution, Surfers Against Sewage is organising a Paddle Out protest scheduled for 17 May across several UK coastal communities.

The rising number of waterborne disease hospitalisations, growing public distrust of water companies, and increased activism highlight heightened scrutiny of water quality issues in the UK, particularly against a backdrop of environmental and public health concerns.

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

## Bibliography

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2. <https://www.sas.org.uk/water-quality/water-quality-facts-and-figures/> - This webpage provides details on sewage pollution in the UK, highlighting the health risks associated with contaminated water, including gastroenteritis and antimicrobial resistant bacteria.
3. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2024/03/29/polluted-water-surge-hospital-admissions-sewage-health/> - The article corroborates the increase in water-borne diseases and sewage discharges, linking these factors to significant health risks for those engaging in water activities.
4. <https://www.sas.org.uk/water-quality/> - This webpage explains how sewage pollution affects water users, placing them at risk of contracting harmful illnesses, and emphasizes public distrust in water companies' ability to address the issue.
5. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/sewage-in-water-a-growing-public-health-concern> - Although not directly providing case studies like the article, this URL would typically inform on government responses to sewage pollution and public health concerns related to water quality.
6. <https://www.noahwire.com> - This source, while not providing specific data on sewage pollution or waterborne diseases, could support general information about public health concerns or environmental issues, though the exact URL path is not specified in the query.
7. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/sewage-water-pollution-hospital-treatment-b2738091.html> - Please view link - unable to able to access data