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Testing the waters —literally — at Orange County beaches

A new rapid testing procedure at nine popular beaches will let surfers and swimmers know if the water is safe.



Tami Halle, a senior environmental health aide with Orange County's Health Care Agency, takes a sample of ocean water from Baby Beach at Dana Point Harbor. (Irfan Khan, Los Angeles Times / June 19, 2010)

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A new pilot program in Orange County this summer will for the first time test for bacteria in

Graphic: Testing water on Orange County beaches

In an age of instant gratification, testing the health of beach water remains painfully slow.


By the time lab work and calculations are complete — up to four days after samples are taken — sewage and runoff-fouled water may already have exposed swimmers and surfers to pathogens that can cause gastrointestinal viruses, ear and eye

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infections, skin rashes and other ailments.

That is to change this summer, with plans to make Southern California the first place in the nation to issue health advisories using a rapid testing method that dramatically reduces the time it takes to detect ocean water contamination.

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The new process probes beach water for the DNA of bacteria that indicate the presence of human waste. Health agencies can determine results within two hours and warn the public the same day to stay out of the water.

Nine heavily used Orange County beaches are to be monitored with the same-day testing methods this summer under a demonstration project planned by the Southern California Coastal Water Research Project, a Costa Mesa-based research institute.

The test to be run during the height of the summer beach season is intended to offer an early look at technology likely to be adopted nationwide. Federal environmental regulators are expected to endorse a rapid testing method by 2012.

Coastal communities around the country are watching closely to see if Orange County succeeds in getting a quick read of the health of its beaches.

"It's been a big hole in efforts to monitor the beaches, because it's always been retrospective, and you find out too late," said Dr. Jack Skinner, a semi-retired internal medicine physician and longtime Newport Beach surfer who said he has contracted eye infections from ocean water numerous times.

Two sanitation districts and Orange County's Health Care Agency will administer the new test five times a week in July and August at nine sites in Huntington Beach, Newport Beach and Dana Point once final approval is given later this month. They are to use the new method side by side with the standard 24-hour method as a fallback.

The locations, which include often-contaminated waters near the Santa Ana River mouth, Newport Beach Pier and Doheny State Beach, were chosen because they typically fail health standards at least 5% of the time.

Health experts have known for decades that swimming in foul water can have serious, even fatal consequences.

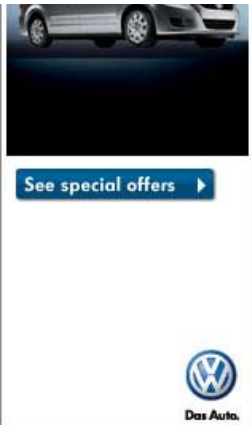
Laguna Beach native James Pribram, 39, said he has contracted staph infections three times from unknowingly swimming in pathogen-laden water, most recently in September. While surfing in Laguna Beach in 2005, he said, his toes became so infected they ballooned up like hot dogs.

His worst experience was on a sunny August day in 1997 when he was giving a surf lesson near a creek outfall at Doheny State Beach. There was no reason to think the water was dirty or unsafe.


"I had a tiny little scratch on my wrist, and within two, maybe three hours, I had this huge red swelling. I couldn't believe what I was looking at," said Pribram, the owner of Aloha School of Surfing.

He went to the emergency room, where he was treated for a severe staph infection and told that if he hadn't sought help, it could have killed him.

A more timely health advisory, he said, might have kept him out of the water.



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"If they were testing in real time, I think it would change a lot of peoples' minds to take ocean pollution seriously," he said.

In late April at Huntington State Beach, for instance, there were unsafe levels of indicator bacteria in the ocean, a clear warning that beachgoers should stay out of the water. But the samples taken that morning didn't spur action until the next afternoon, when lifeguards were told to post warning signs along a 1,000-foot stretch of sand.

"We could have posted the day the samples were taken instead of 24 hours later," if the new procedure had been in use, said Larry Honeybourne, who manages the testing program for Orange County's Health Care Agency.

Researchers have been working on ways to offer same-day test results for about a decade, and the State Water Board has spent \$7.8 million in grants to develop methods that will inform beachgoers about water quality "in a near-real-time manner," according to spokesman William L. Rukeyser.

The process being used during the Orange County pilot program uses a method developed by researchers at the University of North Carolina.

In conjunction with the project, Miocean, an Irvine nonprofit, will install waterproof flat-screen monitors at three of the test beaches to display the same-day closure and advisory data transmitted wirelessly from the county's health agency, with the hope of giving beachgoers an idea of how safe the water is before they dip their toes in the surf.

And just as swifter testing will help close dirty beaches more promptly, officials also hope it will let them reopen them more quickly.

The Environmental Protection Agency is required to announce its new water quality criteria and publish its rapid testing methods by October 2012 under a federal consent decree and legal settlement with the Natural Resources Defense Council.

In California, funds for state-mandated beach testing are set to run out at the end of the year, so the hope is that new technology will at least make the tests that are performed more effective at protecting beachgoers.

The Environmental Protection Agency is in its fourth year of testing beaches in New Jersey using rapid testing, but authorities have not used the new method for health advisories in that state.

And in Marin, Sonoma and San Francisco counties, researchers are conducting a study using a handheld device called a PhyloChip to quickly test ocean water for thousands of microbes. But that too is still in the research phase.

So for now, beach communities on both coasts have their eyes on Orange County.

"The holy grail would be a probe you could stick into the water that gives you an instant result," said Rick Wilson, coastal management coordinator for the Surfrider Foundation. "But this is the best we've got for now."

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