



## **Swimming in the Georges River**

Up until the mid-1900s, many more people swam in the Georges River than do today. This was partly owing to people tending to enjoy recreational activities close to home. With improved transport options most people can now travel further to go for a swim. Today, most people can travel to swim in pools or at the beach, rather than in local rivers. But, increasing pollution and increasing knowledge of severe health issues arising from exposure to those pollutants also pushed people out of the Georges River. There is still a stated desire to be able to swim in rivers, but there are several obstacles that need to be overcome to make this feasible.

### **Safe swimming**

For safe swimming water needs to be free from: physical hazards (including sharp beds, floating or submerged debris likely to cause injury, steep dropoffs and dangerous currents); pathogens (including viruses, protozoa and bacteria) and cyanobacteria; harmful chemicals; and substances that detract from aesthetic quality and/or make water murky, and dangerous wildlife. Ideally, water should be clear enough to allow swimmers to estimate depth, easily see hazards below the surface and fellow swimmers that are underwater. If not, active avoidance of hazards is hindered and visibly diminished water quality is often indicative that there is also poor chemical and/or microbial quality.

### **Health risks**

You severely risk your health if you swim in water into which sewage has recently leaked. There are harmful bacteria associated with sewage leaks, such as Enterococci and Escherichia coli. There are other pathogens that can occur in water and cause illness if ingested whilst swimming, such as

Giardia and Cryptosporidium. Blue-green algal blooms (cyanobacteria) can produce toxins that can cause serious illness if ingested. The health issues most likely to be caused by contact with water contaminated with high concentrations of pathogenic microbes are gastroenteritis and respiratory infections, with infection of ears, eyes and skin also possible.

There are also heavy metals and other inorganic pollutants bound to sediments in the Georges River. If concentrations are low, the effects of many of this group of pollutants are less immediate than the pathogens mentioned above, but the risks from exposure to them needs consideration. For example, lead can be absorbed through the skin and accumulate in our bodies, causing a range of problems that are more severe for exposed children than for adults.

Children generally tend to have greater susceptibility to health risks in water, as they are still growing, and they typically spend more time in the water than their parents. Children are also more likely to swallow some water, plus they haven't necessarily fully developed the ability to assess and avoid risks. Of course, young children should always be closely supervised when near water.

**See our map showing swimming spots**  
[www.georgesriver.org.au](http://www.georgesriver.org.au)



## Check 'Beachwatch' before you swim

Experts, including those from Beachwatch and NSW Health, recommend against swimming within three days of heavy rain in the Georges River, owing to pollutants in stormwater and potential for wet weather sewage overflows. Before you swim, check the pollution forecast by Beachwatch at [www.environment.nsw.gov.au/beachapp/BotanyBulletin.aspx?NoMobile](http://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/beachapp/BotanyBulletin.aspx?NoMobile)

## Wildlife threats in the Georges River

Bullsharks are able to travel all the way up to Liverpool Weir. It has been some time since the last fatal shark attack in the river, but there were numerous documented attacks through the 1930s and 1940s. Large sharks have recently been caught by anglers in the Georges River. Although lower in abundance than during the early period of European settlement, when Botany Bay was known as Stingray Bay, there are still stingrays in the bay and lower Georges River estuary that have venomous spines.

## Unwise to swim outside enclosures

There are also rapid increases in depth and dangerous currents running along the shorelines of some locations in the Georges River and Botany Bay. It is very unwise to swim outside of bathing enclosures in the Georges River estuary, from Liverpool Weir to Botany Bay. It is also unwise to ignore warning signs or enter the water if you don't have adequate swimming skills. You may enter the shallows if you can't swim do not go into deep water where currents may pull you in further.

## Upper Georges River

You may swim in the freshwater swimming holes in the upper Georges River catchment, such as in Kentlyn

## The drain is only for the rain

Being safely able to swim in more locations along the Georges River will require greater awareness that everything that flows into drains is untreated before it enters waterways, like the Georges River.

If behaviours change and we minimise the pollutants going down our drains, we will have cleaner rivers that provide many more recreational opportunities, including swimming in the Georges River.

Basin and Minerva Pool. Those swimming holes are located above all stormwater inputs that enter the river, so they are not affected by pollutants harmful to people.

## Middle Georges River

There are both legacy and ongoing pollutants that may hinder the feasibility of swimming in the middle reaches of the Georges River. Ingesting, inhaling or absorbing water through your skin while swimming make it more likely to catch any diseases present. Stormwater and sewage leaks carry pollutants to the Georges River, some of which are directly toxic, whilst others create conditions in which pathogens thrive.

## Lower Georges River

There are swimming baths in the lower river: Dolls Point Baths, Sandringham Baths, Carss Park Baths, Oatley Bay Baths, Como Baths and Jew Fish Bay Baths (see the map at [www.georgesriver.org.au](http://www.georgesriver.org.au) for locations of these baths). Pollutants entering the lower river are flushed out by tidal water movement, so the water quality may be suitable for swimming, except if there is a nearby sewage spill or stormwater is being discharged after rain.

*Thank you to NSW Health for providing the expert advice used to inform this factsheet.  
[www.swsldh.health.nsw.gov.au](http://www.swsldh.health.nsw.gov.au)*



## "Best practice environmental management for a liveable Georges River."

Georges Riverkeeper coordinates projects on behalf of our partners to protect the Georges River from litter, pollution, stormwater, weeds and pest invasions.



**For more information:**

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