

# Gotta go? The ocean is not a toilet



AMANDA RIPPEN WHITE/DELAWARE WAVE

## Residents worry over beach hygiene

**By Jon Bleiweis**

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**BETHANY BEACH** — To some, the Atlantic Ocean may be considered the East Coast's largest restroom. To others, the practice of using the vast body of water for that purpose disgusts them.

Bethany Beach resident Tom Wright said the ocean is not the place for people to take care of their business.

"The restroom is right here," he said from the Bethany Beach Boardwalk. "I think if they have to go, they can come up here and do it."

Gloria Northwood, 11, of Bel Air, Md., agrees.

"(They do it) because they're lazy and they don't feel like using the bathroom," she said. "It's careless and inconsiderate."

Dr. Mark Frana, a biology professor at Salisbury University, said urine is typically sterile, so it's not exactly a source of worry.

"It is possible that urine can have some kind of bacterial contaminants if someone has an infection, but it's generally

# Toilet

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thought that those diseases are not spread to another person via contaminated urine," he said. "Urine is not really a source of concern for contamination."

Fecal matter is another story.

In many cases, people are unaware they've been in contact with feces, Frana said. When people swallow ocean water when they're swimming, if there's fecal contamination of any significance from a human source, there is risk for illness.

"Does it mean someone will get sick if there is human fecal bacteria? Not necessarily, but there's certainly an increased risk," he said.

Frana said if the fecal material comes from healthy individuals, it's typically not harmful. However, if it's coming from someone who is sick, there may be pathogens mixed in that could cause bacterial or viral infections.

"The problem is that if you have fecal contamination from human sources, you don't know if he's sick," he said. "It's hard to know at any particular time what percentage of the population might have some infectious disease. The point is, if there's

any human fecal material there, someone might be sick."

Physical contact with human feces could result in ear infections or rashes, Frana said.

"The population that is most concerned is immunocompromised individuals — very young children or the elderly — whose immune status isn't as strong as a normal, healthy adult," he said. "Those kind of individuals are more at risk."

Michael Bott, an environmental scientist with the Shellfish and Recreational Water program at the Delaware Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control, said his agency tests the water quality at 20 Atlantic Ocean beach sites in Sussex County.

Those include the state parks, Lewes, Rehoboth Beach, Dewey Beach, Bethany Beach, South Bethany Beach and Fenwick Island, as well as three sites on the Delaware Bay beaches.

All beaches are tested weekly from the first week in May until the third week in September, Bott said, with five of them being tested twice a week. The water tested is at a thigh-height level.

Frana said it's hard to determine how often water is contaminated from feces, but the ocean is tested routinely in Maryland and Delaware. If

the numbers are above a certain level, warnings will be posted, though that doesn't happen often.

In fact, according to Bott, DNREC has not had to post an advisory for elevated bacterial levels at any Atlantic Ocean beach site in the last three years.

"We've been very lucky," he said.

Baltimore resident Mark Scheuerman said he believes "using the restroom" in the ocean is a pretty common occurrence.

"Pools are a little worse, but in the ocean, if you give someone a valid warning that you're around and that you're about to do that and you can clear the area, the waves wash it up offshore," he said. "It's not that big a deal."

Sometimes, Scheuerman said, if there's no bathroom nearby, desperation calls.

"If you're camping out on the beach, you don't have too many options," he said. "It's better than exposing yourself in public."

But only No. 1 is OK, he said. "Aqua dumps are inconsiderate, for sure," Scheuerman said.

Northwood said she once had the misfortune of stepping in poop while in the ocean.

"Since it was the ocean, I just washed my foot," she said.