

THERE IS A CURE FOR THE SUMMERTIME BLUES

Feeling sick after that waterside picnic? Skunked after a long day of fishing that once favorite hot spot? Before you blame the potato salad or toss your fishing license into the trash, consider the water that you swam or fished in. Waters polluted by stormwater can cause stomach illness, respiratory disease and eye, ear and skin infections in swimmers. Contaminated stormwater can disrupt the aquatic food chain, deplete oxygen levels in lakes and streams and destroy spawning habitat necessary for the survival of healthy fish populations.

Many people don't realize that stormwater pollution is a serious problem but, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, contaminated stormwater is responsible for over 50% of all surface water impairments in the country.

Floating litter and debris, oily sheens and murky, discolored waterways are hard to miss, but stormwater pollution is not always easy to spot. Toxic chemicals and microscopic bacteria and pathogens can be present in what otherwise appears to be a clean water body. In between storm events, contaminated sediments can settle out on lake bottoms and streambeds. Similarly, the presence of aquatic life doesn't necessarily signal healthy water quality. Plants and fish can survive in contaminated water just as humans can survive in a smoke filled room. It's not pleasant and it will eventually take a toll on our health, but it doesn't kill us instantly.

Many types of substances have a negative impact water quality. Sometimes it's easy to identify where those substances are coming from, and sometimes it's not. Non-point source pollution is water contamination that cannot be attributed to a single discharge point and is very difficult to control. This is the type of pollution that enters surface waters through stormwater. When rainwater and melting snow cannot infiltrate the land's surface, it runs across the land, picking up dirt, trash, oil, grease, chemicals and waste left on the ground or pavement by automobiles, people and animals. Stormwater runoff eventually makes its way into storm drains, ditches and other structures designed to quickly move stormwater off site. Storm drains do not flow to wastewater treatment plants but rather, they act as a superhighway for transporting pollutants directly to streams, rivers, lakes and wetlands.

The best way to treat non-point source pollution is to prevent the release of pollutants in the first place. Simple actions go a long way. Pick up after your pet. Use fertilizers and pesticides sparingly and according to directions. Never discharge anything but stormwater into a storm drain. Seed bare spots in your lawn and cover soil and compost piles until you are ready to use them.

To protect yourself when you are swimming, check the beach for stormwater outfalls. If you see any, don't swim near them. Don't let children play in the pools these outfalls might make. What looks like a safe play zone away from waves and currents is a potential health hazard. Avoid swimming after a heavy rain. Check the water for trash or oil slicks. Don't swallow the water or even get it in your mouth.

It's been a long time since we could drink untreated water from area lakes and streams but who knew swimming could make you sick? Working together we can all be part of the stormwater pollution solution.

To learn more about stormwater issues and what you can do to protect our water resources, visit the Central New York Regional Planning & Development Board's stormwater website at www.cnyrpd.org/stormwater-phase2.