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ODH OFFERS TOLL-FREE BATHING BEACH INFORMATION LINE

Call 1-866-OHIO-BCH for info

COLUMBUS – Beginning today, Ohioans can call a toll-free telephone number to learn whether warning signs are posted at their favorite beach.

A taped message will inform callers which beaches have high levels of bacteria in the water that may make swimmers sick. Beaches that are not mentioned on the recording do not have signs posted. The message will be updated Tuesday through Friday.

The Ohio Department of Health (ODH) Bathing Beach Monitoring Program launched the information line – 1-866-OHIO-BCH (644-6224) – to help swimmers learn about conditions at 88 public beaches in Ohio. ODH samples these beaches in cooperation with the Ohio Department of Natural Resources, local health departments and public and private organizations along the Lake Erie shoreline. Sample results are also available online at <http://www.odh.state.oh.us/ODHPrograms/BEACH/beachmain.htm>.

“Information is key to making informed decisions,” said ODH Director J. Nick Baird, M.D. “Whether online or by telephone, Ohioans have more tools than ever to help protect and improve their health.”

If *E. coli* bacteria levels exceed state standards, ODH recommends the posting of signs to inform beachgoers of conditions that may make it unsafe for some to swim. The signs read: “Water Quality Advisory – Bacterial levels here currently exceed state standards. Children, the elderly and those in ill health are advised not to swim.”

Gastroenteritis is the most common illness associated with swimming in polluted water. Symptoms include nausea, vomiting, cramps, fever, headache and diarrhea. Swimmers can reduce their chances of getting sick by steering clear of visible discharge pipes; keeping their head and face out of the water; not swallowing the water; showering after swimming; and waiting 24 hours after a heavy rainfall before swimming.

Ohioans can help keep beaches clean by not feeding birds and by disposing of trash and pet waste in proper containers. ODH will keep the information line open throughout the summer; it will reopen in May 2005.