



# FITNESS COACH

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## Q: Are Open-Water Swimmers at Risk for Flesh-Eating Bacterial Infections?

Should I be concerned about *Vibrio vulnificus* cases reported in Florida and Maryland?

By: Amanda MacMillan (</1746321/amanda-macmillan>) Aug 21, 2014



No, you aren't the only one in the water. Ever. Photo: stefanschurr/Thinkstock

**A:** In the mood for a horror story? Look not to summer blockbusters but to your newsfeed, where reports are detailing encounters with a supposed real-life flesh-eating bacteria, *Vibrio vulnificus*. Some articles point out that these infections can result in amputation of infected body parts, or can even be deadly if they get into your bloodstream.

And how does it feel once they've entered your body? "Kinda like you're on fire from within," one victim recalled (<http://kfor.com/2014/08/04/texas-woman-recounts-her-unreal-fight-against-flesh-eating-bacteria/>).

But don't panic, insists Gabby Barbarite, a Ph.D. student who studies Vibrio (<http://www.fau.edu/hboi/newsroom/Vibrio%20in%20IRL%20Study%20PR%20July%202014>) Florida Atlantic University's Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institution. For most people, even those in affected regions, the water is still safe—especially when you're using common sense.

Unless you're swallowing large quantities of contaminated water, Vibrio needs an open wound to get into your body. And the Centers for Disease Control points out (<http://www.cdc.gov/vibrio/vibriov.html>) that if you have a normal immune system, you're far less likely to get infected. If you do happen to have an open wound or existing medical condition, don't risk taking a dip in brackish water (think estuaries and coastal channels) in the Florida and D.C. areas, where cases of Vibrio have been reported.

"We don't want to deter people from going in the water, from doing triathlons or going kayaking," says Barbarite. Unfortunately, some media outlets have dubbed Vibrio a "flesh-eating bacteria" that's "terrorizing beachgoers (<http://gawker.com/florida-warns-beachgoers-of-flesh-eating-bacteria-in-th-1612206008>)"—a statement that's wrong on several counts, she says. The bacteria does not spontaneously dissolve skin.

If you were to get infected after swimming in infested waters, you'd start to see obvious signs (like swelling, oozing, and inflammation at the injury site) fairly quickly. And in nearly all cases, antibiotics can clear up the infection quickly. But wait longer than 24 hours to seek treatment and you risk permanent injury.

**Bottom line:** If you don't have an open wound, don't worry about Vibrio next time you hit up the swimming hole. Worst-case scenario, symptoms of infection are unmistakable, and getting to the doctor pronto will have you feeling better in no time.