

UKHSA North East Q&A on preliminary results from 2023 World Triathlon Championship Series Sunderland

What do these preliminary results mean?

This means that, out of the laboratory results received (31 samples to date) UKHSA North East has detected Norovirus in 60% of samples (19/31).

Have other infections been detected?

Yes, so far other viruses (including sapovirus, astrovirus and rotavirus) have been detected in samples from a small number of participants. E. Coli have also been detected in a small number of samples. These E. Coli are not the type associated with severe illness (Shiga toxin-producing, *Escherichia coli*) and can be carried naturally in the gut of healthy individuals, so it is not possible to say whether their presence is as a result of participation in the event.

It is not uncommon to detect more than one infection following testing of faecal samples, but the predominance of Norovirus makes it the most likely explanation of illness in participants.

What about the results that have come back negative?

Negative results do not mean someone that has had symptoms was not ill but that the laboratory did not identify pathogens in that sample. Not all of the samples from those who have been unwell will be positive.

This is for a number of reasons - sometimes it can be difficult to grow bacteria and viruses in the laboratory and the amount of pathogen present also varies depending on the length of time after illness that the sample was taken.

Does a negative result mean that tests were not reliable?

No – samples are processed using the standard accredited tests used by all microbiology laboratories and as stated above it can depend on the length of time after illness that samples were tested.

What does a negative result mean for the investigation of this outbreak?

The investigation of human specimens forms only one part of the investigation. We also look closely at the symptoms people have had and what they have reported doing in the days prior to experiencing symptoms.

Participants will still be considered as a case if they became unwell with symptoms after participating in the event even if their specimen tested negative.

How many people have tested positive for Norovirus?

To date (15 August 2023) norovirus has been identified in 19 samples

Did participants with Norovirus have other infections too?

Yes, laboratory results show that a small number of participants tested positive for other viruses (including sapovirus, astrovirus and rotavirus). E. Coli have also been detected in a small number of samples. These E. Coli are not the type associated with severe illness (Shiga toxin-producing, Escherichia coli) and can be carried naturally in the gut of healthy individuals, so it is not possible to say whether their presence is as a result of participation in the event.

Can we be sure that all those who reported being ill will be tested and get their results?

The details of all participants who contacted British Triathlon and reported illness were passed onto the UKHSA North East's Health Protection Team who sent out a questionnaire and sample pot.

We have so far been contacted by 88 participants.

Despite the preliminary findings we still encourage those who experienced symptoms after the event to contact British Triathlon and UKHSA North East will follow up their information.

What about participants who travelled or reside overseas?

We have provided support and advice to those participants who reported symptoms and have since travelled overseas or who live abroad.

We have asked these participants to complete an in-depth questionnaire. For practical purposes it was not feasible to request that they submit a faecal sample.

How will participants who sent samples get their results

They will be initially sent a text with a follow-on letter

Once a final Outbreak report is available, all participants (regardless of whether they had symptoms or not) will be sent an executive summary of the findings.

Are there reports of any serious infections such as E coli O157?

Fortunately, all lab results to date have tested negative for infections such as E coli O157/STEC (Shiga toxin-producing Escherichia coli) which may cause severe gastrointestinal illness

Although E. Coli was detected by the Environment Agency in nearby bathing waters this is not that same strain that causes E. coli O157 and other serious infections. Although no STEC has been detected in the samples submitted to date, a small number of participants have tested positive for other E. coli. People can naturally carry these organisms in their gut, and it would not be possible to say whether they had a positive result due to their participation in the event or if they were already carrying these organisms.

Do the preliminary results give an indication of where the infection was picked up?

Norovirus is very easily transmitted through contact with people with the infection and any food, water, surfaces or objects that have been contaminated with the virus. Although investigations continue, we may never know the exact source of infection.

Could it have been picked up from swimming?

It is possible for norovirus infection to occur following exposure to contaminated water, but it has not been possible to identify the likely cause of infection from investigations to date and there are other scenarios in which infection could also have been spread.

Did this mean that participants who took part may have been ill and spread the infection?

The North East Health Protection Team were not notified of any illness prior to the event but some participants have since reported being ill before or on the day of the event

Norovirus does spread very easily between people and from people touching contaminated surfaces and exposure through contaminated water.

Our advice to anyone with symptoms of diarrhoea and/or vomiting remains:

- Wash hands thoroughly and regularly at all times, but particularly after using the toilet and before eating.
- Do not go swimming for at least 48 hours after symptoms have stopped or for a longer period if advised by a doctor.
- Do not visit friends or relatives in residential care homes until you have fully recovered and have been free of symptoms for at least 48 hours as there is a real

risk that you would introduce the infection into these communities putting vulnerable people at risk.

- Stay away from work or school until you have fully recovered and been free of symptoms for 48 hours.
- Do not handle or prepare food for other people until you have been free of symptoms for at least 48 hours.

What symptoms were reported to UKHSA North East?

Participants reported a range of symptoms including diarrhoea, vomiting, stomach cramps, nausea and fever

Were just the athletes affected?

To date our survey has shown that those participants affected were from across all of the race categories.

Our case definition was anyone who **participated** in the Sunderland Triathlon on 29-30 July 2023 who experienced diarrhoea and/or vomiting following the event.

Organisers also received no reports of illness other than from those who participated in the races.

What is UKHSA advice re open swimming?

General information and health advice on swimming in open water is available here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/swim-healthy-leaflet/swim-healthy>

Everyone can reduce the risk of becoming ill by:

Choose where and when to swim

- Up to date bathing water quality information is available online during the bathing season between May and September. Other considerations to help you choose where to go include:
- checking the [water quality information](#) for over 400 designated bathing waters in England
- avoiding bathing on higher risk days, by checking the [pollution risk forecast](#), or look for signs at the beach

Before you swim

There are a number of things you should consider including:

- choosing the location carefully and avoid swimming in water with blue-green algal blooms or scums in freshwaters
- covering cuts, scratches or sores with a waterproof plaster before swimming
- wearing appropriate protective clothing such as a wetsuit, gloves or protective footwear

While you are swimming

Remember to:

- avoid stream water running across the beach
- try to avoid swallowing or splashing water into your mouth
- observe local safety advice

After swimming

Following the swim, you can minimise the risk of becoming ill by:

- cleaning your hands thoroughly with soap and water ensuring that all wet sand is removed from hands before eating or handling food
- thoroughly cleaning cuts or abrasions using soap and water
- handle your wetsuit with care after use. Rinse it with clean water as soon as is practicable after swimming. Clean with detergent and rinse as advised by the manufacturer. Always wash your hands with soap and water after handling or cleaning your wetsuit. Allow the suit to dry thoroughly before reuse.

What to do if you become unwell

If you do become unwell with diarrhoea or any other symptoms, seek medical help and let them know you have been open water swimming. Do not swim again until you have had no diarrhoeal symptoms for at least 48 hours, or for a longer period if advised by a doctor.

Information on bathing water and beach risks is available here:

GOV.UK [bathing waters collection of information](#)

GOV.UK [quality of local bathing water information](#)

Surfers Against Sewage provide the [Safer Seas Service app](#), which uses open data from across the UK and water company updates to provide real-time water quality alerts for over 350 locations in the UK

