

Olympic athletes will be swimming in Rio's filth

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International experts say it's too late for a cleanup

RIO DE JANEIRO — The waters where Olympians will compete in swimming and boating events next summer in South America's first games are rife with human sewage and present a serious health risk for athletes, as well as visitors to the iconic beaches of Rio de Janeiro.



MARIO TAMA/GETTY IMAGES

A boy looks for items to recycle along the Cunha canal, which flows into Guanabara Bay, the site of sailing events for the Rio 2016 Olympic Games. Athletes training in Rio de Janeiro are already falling ill.

An Associated Press investigation found dangerously high levels of viruses and bacteria from sewage in venues where athletes will compete in the 2016 Olympic and Paralympic water sports.

The AP conducted four rounds of tests starting in March. The results have alarmed international experts and dismayed competitors

training in Rio, some of whom have already fallen ill with fevers, vomiting and diarrhea.

These ailments could knock an athlete out for days, potentially curtailing Olympics dreams and the years of hard training behind them.

"This is by far the worst water quality we've ever seen in our sailing careers," said Ivan Bulaja, a coach for the Austrian team, which has spent months training on the Guanabara Bay. "I am quite sure if you swim in this water and it goes into your mouth or nose that quite a lot of bad things are coming inside your body."

Sailor David Husl has already fallen ill.

"I've had high temperatures and problems with my stomach," Husl said. "It's always one day completely in bed and then usually not sailing for two or three days."

Water pollution has long plagued Brazil's urban areas, where most sewage isn't collected, let alone treated. In Rio, much of the waste runs through open-air ditches to fetid streams and rivers that feed the Olympic water sites and blight the city's beaches.

Dr. Richard Budgett, the medical director for the International Olympic Committee, said after seeing the AP findings the IOC and Brazilian authorities should stick to their program of testing only for bacteria to determine whether the water is safe for athletes, as is the accepted norm globally.

Many water and health experts in the U.S. and Europe are pushing regulatory agencies to include viral testing in determining water quality because the majority of illnesses from recreational water activities are related to viruses, not bacteria.

Brazilian authorities pledged a major overhaul of the city's waterways would be among the Olympics' most significant legacies. But the stench of raw sewage still greets travellers arriving at Rio's international airport. Prime beaches remain deserted because the surf is thick with putrid sludge, and periodic die-offs leave the Olympic lake littered with rotting fish.

Brazilian officials insist the waters will be safe, but the AP testing over five months found not one venue fit for swimming or boating, according to international experts, who say it's too late for a cleanup.

"What you have there is basically raw sewage," said John Griffith, a marine biologist at the independent Southern California Coastal Water Research Project. "It's all the water from the toilets and the showers and whatever people put down their sinks, all mixed up, and it's going out into the beach waters."



In the U.S., Griffith said, areas with such levels of contamination "would be shut down immediately."