



Pollution from sewer overflows

Sewer overflows in Scotland discharged over 30 billion litres of sewage in 2024 – more than 12,000 Olympic swimming pools. In 2025, half of the designated swimming sites had at least one test showing unsafe levels of faecal bacteria.

What are sewer overflows?

Much of Scotland's urban areas have a sewer system that collects sewage and rainwater. To prevent flooding from heavy rainfall, sewage is discharged into waterways through overflows. There are 4,226 sewer overflows in Scotland.

Why do sewer overflows cause pollution?

Sewage spills have increased by a quarter since 2022. Sewer overflows spill more often because of ageing infrastructure, a growing population and climate change, with 20% classified as unsatisfactory. 80% of overflows do not have screens to collect sewage litter like sanitary towels.

**In 2024,
Scottish Water
recorded 24,398 spills.**
This covered only
6.5% of overflows, so
the true number is
likely higher.

Can sewage pollution affect my health?

Yes. Bacteria and viruses in sewage can cause illnesses and infections. Sewage can contaminate water, plastic litter, beach sand and seafood.

Can sewage spills be reduced?

Yes. Maintaining sewer infrastructure and building more capacity will reduce spills. Blue-green infrastructure, like rain gardens and sustainable drainage systems, absorb rainfall and reduce pressure on sewers.

Does it harm the environment?

Yes. Although 87% of Scotland's waters are classified as having good or better water quality, many pollutants are not monitored and wildlife can also be harmed by eating litter in sewage. In 2024, Beachwatch volunteers picked 22,332 wet wipes from Scottish beaches.

**We all have the right to
SAFE AND
SUFFICIENT
WATER.**

What is the Scottish Government doing about sewage pollution?

Scottish Water is publicly owned and regulated by the Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA). Environmental Standards Scotland has recommended actions to address pollution from sewer overflows.

The Scottish Government elected in May 2026 will set priorities for the water industry to 2033 and must keep pace with the EU in regulating sewage.

Take action and join the campaign to Clean Up Scotland's Sewage

What can I do if I have a concern?

Contact our free legal advice service at www.ercs.scot/get-advice

All data is accurate in March 2026, for a full set of references contact admin@ercs.scot

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