

Water Quality

One of the plus sides of Britain's declining industry and EU legalisations is that our rivers are becoming cleaner and less polluted. However, unless the river is miles from civilization, the water quality is not always perfect. Generally, if you follow a few common-sense guidelines, you should not suffer any serious ill-effects from the river.

However, all inland canoeists should be aware of two potentially serious, although very rare, water quality issues: blue-green algae blooms and Weil's Disease.

Blue-green algae

In the case of blue-green algae, if it is known to be present in a stretch of water (normally stagnant or slow moving water) then avoid it until it is declared clear. This is necessary normally only for a short time whilst the algae blooms, but follow the advice of the local authorities.

Weils Disease

Weil's Disease or Leptospirosis Icterohaemorrhagia to give it its full title, is an infection carried in rat's urine which can contaminate water and wet river banks. The bacteria which causes it does not survive long in dry conditions. It can be present in any water, including fast flowing streams and rivers but the risk of infection is greatest in slow moving and stagnant water. The infection can be contracted by absorbing bacteria through the skin and the mucous membranes of the mouth and eyes. The bacteria can also enter your bloodstream through cuts on your skin, particularly the feet, and if you capsize or roll your canoe. Thankfully Weil's Disease is rare, but it can be a very serious illness requiring treatment in hospital. The disease is a notifiable illness. If you become ill within a 3 to 19 day period after canoeing then you should see your doctor immediately. The most common symptoms are:

temperature, flu-like illness, joint and muscle pain, often particularly noticeable in the calf muscles. Tell your doctor that you have been canoeing and where. Quick treatment with antibiotics is essential and make sure you receive a blood test. An 'ELISA' test at the local laboratory can normally give a result within a few hours.

Ways to avoid contracting Weil's Disease are very simple:

- Avoid capsizing drills or rolling in stagnant or slow moving water, particularly where rat infestation is obvious.
- Wash or shower after canoeing. Cover minor cuts and scratches with waterproof plasters before getting in your boat.
- Wear trainers or wet suit boots to avoid cutting your feet.
- If you have flu like symptoms after canoeing go to your GP and tell him/her you are a canoeist.