



Avoid Water Contact in Lakes with Algae Blooms

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Recently advisories have warned about algae blooms in local lakes. Blue-green algae reproduce rapidly in fresh water when the amount of sunlight, temperature, and nutrients are adequate. Within a few days a "clear" lake, pond, or ditch can become cloudy with algae growth. This is an algae bloom. Blue-green algae blooms usually float to the surface and can be several inches thick near the shoreline.

If you visit a lake and notice a bright green color or thick scum along the shore, stay out of the water. Avoid areas where there are obvious algae blooms. Some blue-green algae produce toxins, which can cause illness in humans and kill pets, fish, waterfowl, and other animals.

When an algae bloom is occurring in a lake, please take these simple precautions:

- If the water at a lake looks bad, don't swim or contact the water.
- If your water supply is lake water, use an alternate supply. Boiling and algicides are not effective treatments, and may release any potential toxins into the water.
- Keep children, pets, and livestock away from the water. Poisoning is more severe the smaller the person or animal, and the larger the amount of toxin ingested. Pets are the most susceptible because they tend to both drink water and then lick the scum off their fur or paws. Children are also vulnerable because they have less body weight and may accidentally swallow more water than adults.
- Get proper medical or veterinary attention right away if you, your children, pets, or livestock have signs of poisoning.
- Blue-green algae can produce nerve toxins and liver toxins. Signs of neurotoxin poisoning usually appear within 15-20 minutes after ingestion. In animals, signs include weakness, staggering, difficulty in breathing, convulsions, and death. In people, signs may include numbness of the lips, tingling in fingers and toes, and dizziness. Algae can also cause skin rashes.
- It may be hours or days before signs of liver poisoning appear. Liver toxins can cause abdominal pain, diarrhea, and vomiting in humans, and death in animals.
- Some activities are okay in lakes with algae blooms. Boating is okay, but avoid areas where algae are visible. Rinse boats and trailers before going to another lake.

Fishing is okay, but fish should be cleaned as soon as possible and all internal organs should be immediately discarded. Remember to wash your hands after cleaning fish.

Whether a particular bloom is actually toxic cannot be determined without special testing. Moreover, testing only provides information on that single sample, at a particular moment of time. Even the scientific experts have not yet solved the mystery of why, when, and how algae turns toxic. In other words, there is no way to predict when, or if, an algae bloom will be toxic. If the water at your beach looks bad, stay out.

- For more information, including a current list of lakes with algae advisories, contact Thurston County Public Health and Social Services Department at www.co.thurston.wa.us/health/ehadm/swimming/blue_green_algae.html or 360-867-2626, (TDD line 360-867-2603).

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