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This is part of a series of articles addressing the top areas of concern identified by lake residents in the WALPA survey.

Demystifying algae blooms

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Algae blooms are common in some lakes. While these are usually not a threat to human health, in rare cases they can be deadly. A bloom that forms a surface “scum” is the most risky. Humans and animals should avoid contact with scum-covered lakes or ponds. This fact sheet provides basic information and what to do if you have further questions or concerns.

What are blue-green algae?

Blue-green algae are tiny organisms that can reproduce rapidly in fresh water when the conditions are right. Within a few days, a clear lake can become cloudy with algae growth. This is called a “bloom.”

A “blue-green” algae bloom:

- Can be bright green, bluish, brownish, or reddish green in color.
- Often looks like thick green paint floating on the water.
- Usually floats to the surface and can accumulate along the shoreline.
- May form clumps or streaks in the water, and layers several inches thick.
- Is more common in the summer and fall, but can occur any time of the year.
- Is usually not toxic, but you can’t tell just by looking at a bloom if it’s toxic or not. This requires laboratory analysis.

What is a toxic bloom?

Some blue-green algae can produce toxins or poisons. Formation of a surface “scum” is one sign of a potentially toxic bloom. Eventually the toxins break down and are destroyed naturally. Swallowing the algae while they are still poisonous can cause serious illness. Residential drinking water taken from a lake may also be affected.

Signs of a toxic bloom include:

- Unusual numbers of dead fish, waterfowl or other animals.
- Sudden, unexplained sickness or death of a cat or dog, especially if it has algae on its mouth, legs or fur.
- A skin rash on humans after being in the water.

What if I see a bloom?

As soon as you notice a bloom or possible signs of poisoning:

- Avoid all contact with water in areas where the algae is concentrated.
- Keep children, pets and livestock away from the water.
- Report the bloom to your local public health or natural resources agency.

Laboratory tests of water samples can confirm whether or not the bloom is actually toxic.

Symptoms of poisoning

Get proper medical or veterinary attention right away if you, your pets or livestock have signs of poisoning. Poisoning may be more severe in younger people or small animals.

Blue-green algae can produce nerve toxins and liver toxins. Signs of nerve toxin poisoning usually appear within 15 to 20 minutes after ingestion.

In PEOPLE signs of nerve toxin may include:

- Numbness of the lips,
- Tingling in fingers and toes, and
- Dizziness.

In ANIMALS, symptoms may include:

- Weakness,
- Staggering,
- Difficulty breathing, and
- Convulsions, and even death.

Some types of algae blooms may also produce liver toxins. 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.

Contact your doctor immediately if you experience any of these symptoms after swimming. For more information, contact your local public health agency or natural resources department.