

Cyanobacteria and Algal Blooms



What is Blue-Green “Algae”?

Blue-green algae, also referred as cyanobacteria, are organisms that use sunlight to fuel their activities. Toxins, called cyanobacterial toxins may be present in the algae. An algal bloom occurs when there is a rapid and large overgrowth of algae and/or cyanobacteria. Often, these blooms form visible scum on the surface of the water. If toxins are present, they can pose a risk to you or pets if they touch skin or if swallowed.



What are cyanobacterial toxins?

Cyanobacterial toxins are made up of different toxins that can cause damage to nerves or liver, most concerning are in your dogs who may swim in and swallow water contaminated with blue –green algae. Human damage to liver or nerves is very rare. Eventually the toxins break down naturally, but that takes time. You can reduce your risk by limiting recreational activities in the areas affected and avoid drinking the contaminated water.

Are cyanobacteria a year-round problem in water supplies?

No, they usually occur in the late summer to early fall. They can last awhile depending on the size of the bloom, but typically die off naturally and no action is needed.

What kind of harmful effects can I expect from cyanobacterial toxins?

In most cases, no harmful effects occur – especially if you have limited contact with the blue-green algae.

Possible Effects

- Headache
- Fever
- Diarrhea
- Stomach pain
- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Muscle weakness
- Liver problems (rare)
- Itching (different from swimmer’s itch)
- Irritated eyes/skin
- Allergic reactions (i.e. hay-fever or asthma like symptoms)

Stomach effects may begin within 3-5 hours and can last for 1-2 days. Skin effects may occur if you wade or swim in contaminated water.

Are children at greater risk than adults?

Yes, children can experience more severe symptoms due to their smaller body size.



Is it okay for animals to drink water with blue-green algae?

Pets are at much greater risk than people because they are likely to drink more of the contaminated water and their body size is smaller. If a pet swallows a large amount of water and is acting strangely, vomiting, or is having seizures, take the pet to a veterinarian as soon as possible.

How likely am I to drink water with blue-green algae toxins?

With a water supply that is filtered by the city/county, you are unlikely to be exposed through tap water. Water filtered by professionals is safe for showering and drinking. If this water should become unsafe, an alert will be released to the community. If you have a water supply and are near a lake with known algae contamination, call your local health department for information.

Can I cook using water with blue-green algae in it?

Do not boil the water as a remedy. Boiling water does not remove the toxins, but instead breaks the cell wall and releases the toxins into the water.

What about using contaminated water for washing?

Do not use contaminated water for washing clothes and dishes. Do not use contaminated water for bathing or showering.

Can I eat fish from contaminated water?

Fish caught in the lake must be cleaned very well (all the guts discarded and washed with fresh water) before eating. Well cleaned fish do not pose a health risk.

Can water containing blue-green algae blooms be used for recreational activities?

Do not swim or water ski through areas of the lake where a bloom is occurring. Avoid high-speed boating through bloom areas to minimize water spray.

What should I do if I come in contact with blue-green algae?

Call the Utah Poison Control Center at 800-222-1222 if you have been exposed to a potentially harmful algal bloom or if you have any questions or concerns.

If blue-green algae gets on your skin, wash the area with soap and water.



To whom can I report an algal bloom?

- 1st Call your local health department: ualhd.org/members.html
- 2nd For urgent concerns and after hours call DEQ 24-hour Environmental Incidents 801-536-4123



Where can I get additional information about algal blooms?

- Utah Department of Environmental Quality website: deq.utah.gov/Pollutants/H/harmfulalgalblooms/
- Utah Health Department website: health.utah.gov/enviroepi/appletree/HAB/
- Utah Poison Control Center website: utahpoisoncontrol.org

