

Blue-green Algae Blooms FAQs

BLUE-GREEN ALGAE BLOOMS When in doubt, it's best to keep out!

What are blue-green algae?

Cyanobacteria, also called blue-green algae, are microscopic organisms found naturally in all types of water. These single-celled organisms live in fresh, brackish (combined salt and fresh water), and marine water. These algae use sunlight to make their own food. In warm, nutrient-rich (high in phosphorus and nitrogen) environments, blue-green algae can grow quickly, creating blooms that spread across the water's surface. The blooms might become visible.

How are blue-green algae blooms formed?

Blue-green algae blooms form when algae, which are normally found in the water, start to grow very quickly. Blooms can form in warm, slow-moving waters that are rich in nutrients from sources such as fertilizer runoff or septic tank overflows. Blue-green algae blooms need nutrients to survive. The blooms can form at any time, but most often form in late summer or early fall.

What does a blue-green algae bloom look like?

You might or might not be able to see blue-green algae blooms. They might stay below the water's surface, or they might float to the surface. Some blue-green algae blooms can look similar to foam, scum, or mats, particularly when the wind blows them toward a shoreline. The blooms can be blue, bright green, brown, or red. Blooms could look similar to paint floating on the water's surface. As algae in a bloom die, the water may smell bad, similar to rotting plants.

Why are some blue-green algae blooms harmful?

Blue-green algae blooms that harm persons, animals, or the environment are called cyanobacterial harmful algal blooms (CyanoHABs). The possible effects from CyanoHABs on persons, animals, or the environment are:

- Blocking the sunlight that other organisms need to live. Blue-green algae blooms can steal the oxygen and nutrients that other organisms need to live.
- Making toxins, called cyanotoxins. Cyanotoxins are among the most powerful natural poisons known in the study of blue-green algae blooms. These toxins can make people, their pets, and other animals sick. Unfortunately, there are no remedies to counteract the effects.
- You cannot tell if a bloom has toxins by looking at it.

How can persons and animals come in contact with blue-green algae and cyanotoxins that are in the environment?

Persons and animals can come in contact with blue-green algae and cyanotoxins that are in the environment by:

- Drinking water that comes from a lake or reservoir that has a blue-green algae bloom in it.
- Swimming or doing other recreational activities in or on waters that have blue-green algae blooms in them.

How do I protect myself, my family, and my pets from blue-green algae blooms?

To protect yourself, your family and your pets from blue-green algae blooms:

- Don't swim, water ski, or boat in areas where the water is discolored or where you see foam, scum, or mats of algae on the water's surface.
- Do not allow children or pets to play in or drink scummy water.
- Rinse off with fresh water as soon as possible afterwards, if you swim in water that might contain harmful algae blooms.
- Don't let pets or livestock swim in or drink from areas where the water is discolored or where you see foam, scum, or mats of algae on the water's surface.
- If pets, especially dogs, swim in scummy water, rinse them off immediately. Do not let them lick the algae and toxins off their fur.
- Report any "musty" smell or taste in your drinking water to your local water utility.
- Respect any water-body closures announced by local public health authorities.

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Why do dogs get sick more often than persons from blue-green algae blooms?

Dogs will get in a body of water even if it looks or smells bad, including when it contains ongoing harmful algae blooms. Dogs are also more likely to drink the contaminated water.

How are persons or animals that have been exposed to blue-green algae toxins treated?

If you or your pet comes in contact with a blue-green algae bloom, wash yourself and your pet thoroughly with fresh water.

- If you or your pet swallows water from where there is a harmful algae bloom, call your doctor, a poison information center, or a veterinarian.
- Call a veterinarian if your animal shows any of the following symptoms of blue-green algae poisoning: loss of appetite, loss of energy, vomiting, stumbling and falling, foaming at the mouth, diarrhea, convulsions, excessive drooling, tremors and seizures, or any other unexplained sickness after being in contact with water.

How can you help reduce blue-green algae blooms from forming?

To help reduce blue-green algae from forming:

- Use only the recommended amounts of fertilizers on your yard and gardens to reduce the amount that runs off into the environment.
- Properly maintain your household septic system.
- Maintain a buffer of natural vegetation around ponds and lakes to filter incoming water.

Is there testing for blue-green algae toxins?

Yes, but the testing is specialized and can only be done by a few laboratories. (add link for page on website with testing contacts/URLs). Scientists are working to develop toxin test kits for water resource managers and others.

What is CDC doing to address these concerns?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is working to understand and prevent the health effects that are associated with CyanoHABs by:

- Monitoring reports of harmful algae blooms that are related illnesses to look for trends and determine the effects on human and animal health.
- Surveying populations to figure out where and how persons are exposed to blue-green algae toxins.

Where can I find out more?

For more information on blue-green algae, visit <http://www.cdc.gov/nceh/hsb/hab/default.htm> .

- For information on animal health and safety: [Veterinarians Reference](#)
- For information on human health and safety: [Physician Reference](#)
- For more information blue-green algae blooms call the National Center for Environmental Health Harmful Algal Blooms Program (HABISS), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:

866-556-0544

or

Call your local or state health department.