

Blue Green Algae Health Concerns—North Coast Region of California

What are blue green algae? Blue green algae are actually a type of ancient bacteria commonly found in water or wet areas.

What is a blue green algae bloom? When conditions are right, algae can rapidly build up or “bloom” on the surface of reservoirs, rivers, creeks, lagoons, lakes and ponds. The bloom can be green, blue green, white or brown, and may look like a floating layer of scum or paint.

What causes blooms? Warm, slow-moving waters that are rich in nutrients like fertilizer or manure runoff can cause algae growth. Blooms can occur at any time, but are most common in late summer or early fall.

How do I know if a bloom is toxic? Only a few types of blue green algae are known to produce poisons. Most blooms of algae in our region are made up of harmless green algae. North coast counties do not have the resources to test their many water bodies for these toxins. (An exception is the Klamath River, which has been regularly tested for blue green algae toxins by tribal and federal agencies over the summer season for the last few years). Often, the first sign that a bloom is toxic is a dog that has gotten sick after swimming in stagnant water. **Always look for the signs of an algae bloom before you enter the water, or before you let your children or pets enter the water.**

How dangerous are toxic algae? If toxic algae touches your skin, or you accidentally inhale or swallow water containing the toxin during recreation, you could get a rash or an allergic reaction, or develop gastrointestinal problems. The long-term effects of these exposures are not well known, but children and pets are at greatest risk. Since 2001, 9 dog deaths following contact with fresh water bodies in Humboldt and Mendocino Counties are suspected to have been caused by blue green algae poisoning. Dogs can be exposed to particularly high levels of toxins by licking blue green algae off their fur after a swim. No documented incidents of human poisoning from blue green algae have been reported in any of the 3 north coast counties.

What should I do if I see a bloom?

- Stay out of areas where the water has foam, scum, or mats of algae. Keep children and pets out of such areas at all times. If you or your pets swim or wade in water with algae, rinse off with fresh water as soon as possible. Always warn young children not to swallow **any** water, whether or not you see signs of algae.
- Do not drink or cook with this water. Even if you boil or filter it, the toxins can persist.
- Do not let livestock swim in or drink from areas where you see foam, scum, or mats.
- Get medical treatment right away if you think that you, your pet or your livestock might have been poisoned by blue green algae toxins.

What about fishing and other activities? Eating fish caught during a heavy bloom can pose a health risk. Always remove the guts and liver, and rinse fillets in tap water before eating the fish. Other activities near the water such as camping, picnicking, biking and hiking are safe.

Report pet deaths/illnesses following water contact, or unusual numbers of dead or distressed wildlife along the shoreline to:

- Humboldt County – Harriet Hill, REHS, 707-445-6215 or 1-800-963-9241
- Mendocino County – John Morley, REHS, 707-463-4466
- Del Norte County – Peter Esko, REHS, 707-464-3191

Find more information at the California Department of Health Services website:
<http://www.dhs.ca.gov/ps/ddwem/bluegreenalgae/>