



September 2007



Blue-Green Algae

What is Blue-green Algae?

Blue-green Algae (also known as cyanobacteria) is one of the largest and oldest groups of bacteria that grow in water. Many people refer to it as pond scum. Blue-green algae generally grow in lakes, ponds, and slow-moving streams when water is warm and stagnant.

Why is Blue-green Algae in recreational waters a health concern?

Blue-green algae can form blooms that threaten people, animals or the environment and those blooms can but not always:

- Produce toxins that are natural powerful poisons
- Make people, their pets and other animals sick
- Block sunlight and using up all the oxygen in the water, kill other plants and animals

What do Blue-green algae blooms look like?

Blooms often look like green paint floating on water, foam or scum, or mats on the surface of fresh water lakes and ponds. Blooms can be blue, bright green, brown or red. Some blooms may not affect the appearance of the water but as algae in the blooms die, the water may smell bad.

What types of illnesses can people and animals get from being exposed to blue-green algae?

- Skin exposures can give people a rash, hives or skin blisters (especially on the lips and under swimsuits).
- Breathing in water droplets during activities like water-skiing and swimming can cause runny eyes and nose, a sore throat, asthma-like symptoms or allergic reactions.
- Swallowing water can cause:
 - Stomach symptoms to occur within hours or days after an exposure, including abdominal pain, diarrhea and vomiting
 - Neurotoxicity - symptoms can appear within 15 to 20 minutes after exposure.
 - **In humans**, symptoms can include numb lips, tingling fingers and toes, dizziness and in extremely rare cases death.
 - **In dogs**, symptoms can include drooling, weakness, staggering, difficulty breathing, convulsions and death.

What if I, my family or pet get sick because of blue-green algae?

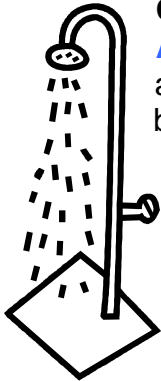
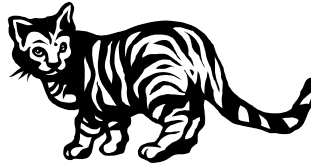
Seek medical treatment immediately and notify your medical provider of the exposure.

For health-related questions, call the New Mexico Department of Health at 1-505-827-0006 or 800-879-3421 or visit the website <http://www.health.state.nm.us/eheb> and for water related questions, call the New Mexico Environment Department at 505-827-2820 or visit the website <http://www.nmenv.state.nm.us/>

Frequently Asked Questions

Question – Who is at greatest health risk from Blue-green algae toxins?

Answer – Small animals and children because they weigh less and can get a relatively larger dose of toxin. Dogs are particularly susceptible to blue-green algae poisoning because scums can attach to their coats and be swallowed during self-cleaning.



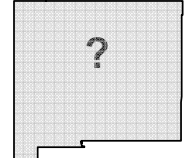
Question – What can we do if we see a Blue-green algae bloom?

Answer – Don't wade, swim, water ski, boat or come in contact with water in areas where the water is discolored or where you see signs of an algae bloom.

- If you do swim or come in contact with the water rinse off with fresh water as soon as possible.
- Don't let pets or livestock swim in or drink from areas where blooms are seen.
- If pets (especially **dogs**) swim in scummy water, rinse them off immediately – do not let them lick the algae off their fur.

Question – Where in New Mexico can Blue-green algae grow?

Answer – Blue-green algae can be found anywhere in New Mexico. However, not all algae is toxic, in fact the vast majority of algae is not dangerous. In certain locations, conditions are better for algae growth, including shallow coves. The shallow coves at Elephant Butte Lake are where known cases of dog poisoning have occurred.



Question – What if I don't see any algae in the water can I still do all the things I normally do like fishing, swimming, water skiing and wading?

Answer – Yes, but remember that it is always a good idea to wash your hands before eating and preparing food and **never** drink or allow pets to drink untreated surface water.

Question – Have there been any deaths in New Mexico due to Blue-green algae toxins?

Answer – There have been NO reported human deaths but there have been several dog deaths. Also, there have been reports of rashes and stomach problems in humans exposed to water with Blue-green Algae.

Question – Can I eat fish from water containing blue-green algae?

Answer – Yes but eat such fish in moderation and avoid eating the guts of the fish, where accumulation of toxins may occur.

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