

Harmful Algal Blooms (HABs)

What are blue-green algae?

Blue-green algae are not algae at all, but types of bacteria called cyanobacteria that are normally present in many lakes. This type of bacteria thrives in warm, nutrient rich water. When conditions are right, the bacteria can grow quickly forming “blooms.” Blue-green algal blooms are often described as looking like pea soup or spilled green paint. Blooms can also produce a swampy odor when the cells break down.

What are harmful algal blooms?

Harmful algal blooms (HABs) are blue-green algal blooms that contain toxins that can cause illness in humans and animals. Although algae themselves are generally not harmful, some blue-green algae can produce toxins, called cyanotoxins. Microcystin is the most common cyanotoxin found in Minnesota.



Where are harmful algal blooms found?

HABs can be found everywhere in Minnesota, but thrive in warm, shallow, nutrient-rich lakes commonly found in central and southern Minnesota.

When do harmful algal blooms occur?

Blooms usually occur during late summer and early fall, but can occur other times of the year if conditions are right.

What are the possible health effects?

People can become sick from HABs after they are swimming, boating, waterskiing, tubing, bathing, or showering in water that has a toxic blue-green algal bloom. During these activities people are exposed to the toxins by swallowing, having skin contact with, or breathing in airborne droplets of water. If someone becomes sick, common symptoms they may experience include vomiting, diarrhea, rash, eye irritation, cough, sore throat, and headache.

Can animals be affected?

Yes, pets are especially susceptible to HABs because they do not always avoid swimming in and drinking from green, smelly water. Their small size also means they do not have to ingest as much water as humans to get sick from the toxins. Symptoms animals might experience include vomiting, diarrhea, weakness, difficulty breathing, and convulsions. In the worst cases, animals have died.

What should I do if I see a bloom?

There is no way to tell if a blue-green algal bloom is toxic or not just by looking at it so caution should always be taken when you see a bloom. Adults, children, and animals should avoid contact with water where a blue-green algal bloom is present until the bloom goes away. If you do go into water where there may be a bloom, wash off with fresh water immediately afterwards, especially the area where your bathing suit touches your body.



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