



Frequently Asked Questions

Blue Green Algae (Cyanobacteria)

What are blue green algae? Blue green algae, also known as Cyanobacteria, are 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? Most blooms of algae in our region are made up of harmless green algae. In the case of blue green algal blooms, several types of blue green algae are known to produce toxins. These toxins are not detectable by the human eye so without scientific testing, it is impossible to determine if toxins are present. Often times, a toxic bloom is discovered when there is a report of a dead or dying animal in the vicinity of the bloom. In some cases, it is a report of a sick dog that was recently swimming in stagnant water. **One should always look for the signs of an algae bloom before entering the water, or before letting your children or pets enter the water.**

How dangerous is toxic blue green 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 drinking the water or 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 three 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.

Is it safe to swim or use the waterways for other recreational purposes? Blue green algae is everywhere. Under the right conditions (water temperature, flow, nutrient load, etc.) a bloom can occur which could potentially lead to the production of harmful toxins. Without testing for these toxins, there will always be uncertainty as to whether the water is safe for recreational purposes. Individuals choosing to recreate in the many water courses that flow through this county are doing so at their own risk. The Department advises individuals to educate themselves on blue green algae and blue green algae blooms so they can identify potential harmful water conditions. If the area is posted for blue green algae, follow the recommendations on the posting. Another helpful resource is the California Water Quality Monitoring Council's website at www.mywaterquality.ca.gov. The website has an interactive harmful algal bloom map showing locations where individuals have voluntarily reported potentially harmful blooms.

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 river banks to:

- **Environmental Management Department**
 - (916) 875-8440,
 - www.emd.saccounty.net or,
- **California Cyanobacteria and Harmful Algal Bloom (CCHAB) Network**
 - Call: 1 (916) 341-5357
 - Call toll free: 1 (844) 729-6466
 - Email: CyanoHAB.Reports@waterboards.ca.gov

For additional information on harmful algae blooms and water conditions throughout the state, visit:

California Cyanobacteria and Harmful Algal Bloom (CCHAB) Network

http://www.mywaterquality.ca.gov/monitoring_council/cyanohab_network/index.html