



Cyanobacterial Blooms in Local Lakes

Lakes on Vancouver Island, the Gulf Islands, and around the province often have low levels of cyanobacteria (blue green algae). Sometimes, levels increase dramatically and produce a bloom. Blooms may be noticeable as scum, fuzz, globs, or may resemble grass clippings. Bloom color may be blue-green, greenish brown or pinkish red. Blooms are naturally occurring, and can appear at any time, though we see them most frequently in late summer and fall.

Some strains of cyanobacteria produce toxins (cyanotoxins), such as microcystin. The type and concentration of toxin present can vary greatly over time. Some areas of an affected water body will have a higher concentration than others. Wind and water currents can move blooms around within a water body. Consequently, testing is challenging and results are difficult to interpret.

Human exposure to cyanotoxins can cause illness. It is never recommended to drink or consume water that is suspected to have a cyanobacterial bloom. Recreational users such as swimmers should also avoid any areas where blooms may be occurring. Exposure to cyanotoxins can result in severe illness, as well as intestinal discomfort and irritation to the skin, nose or eyes. Depending on the type and concentration of toxin present, organ damage is possible.

Pets can become very ill or die from exposure to cyanobacterial blooms. They are particularly vulnerable because they may ingest cyanotoxins by grooming the algae off their fur. Pets should be leashed and prevented from accessing water if a cyanobacterial bloom is suspected.

Public Action Points:

- Avoid contact with water affected by a cyanobacterial bloom, and keep children and pets away. Water bodies with lab confirmed blooms will generally have signage posted, but areas with new blooms or where testing has not been conducted require caution.
- Where there is a bloom, assume that toxins may be present- note that toxins can remain for many weeks after a bloom subsides.
- Obtain drinking water from a safe alternate source - or use bottled water. Boiling the water *does not* make it safe to drink as cyanotoxins will not be destroyed.
- Rinse with fresh water and towel dry as soon as possible any person or pet accidentally coming into contact with the water.

For more information

BC Health File #47: Blue-green Algae (Cyanobacteria) Blooms

<https://www.healthlinkbc.ca/healthlinkbc-files/blue-green-algae>

National Collaborating Center for Environmental Health: Cyanobacteria in Fresh Water

http://www.nceeh.ca/sites/default/files/Cyanobacteria_in_Freshwater-May_2017.pdf

[Contact your local Health Protection Office.](#)