

# Physician Reference

## Blue-green Algae Blooms

When in doubt, it's best to stay out!



Grand Lake Saint Mary's , Summer 2010

### To report a blue-green algae bloom or related health event:

Call your local or state health department

For more information:

<http://www.cdc.gov/nceh/hsb/hab/default.htm>

or

Call the National Center for Environmental  
Health Harmful Algal Blooms Program (HABISS)  
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:  
866-556-0544

#### What are blue-green algae?

Cyanobacteria, sometimes called blue-green algae, are microscopic organisms that live in all types of water.

#### What is a blue-green algae bloom?

- Blue-green algae grow quickly, or bloom, when the water is warm, slow-moving, and full of nutrients.

#### What are some characteristics of blue-green algae blooms?

- Algae usually bloom during the summer and fall. However, they can bloom anytime during the year.
- When a bloom occurs, scum might form on the water's surface.
- Blooms can be many different colors, from green or blue to red or brown.
- As the bloom dies off, you might smell an odor that is similar to rotting plants.

#### What is a toxic bloom?

Sometimes, blue-green algae produce toxins.

- The toxins can be present in the algae or in the water.

#### Other important things to know:

- Swallowing water that has algae or algal toxins in it can cause serious illness.
- Dogs might have more severe symptoms than persons, including collapse and sudden death after swallowing the contaminated water while swimming or after licking algae from their fur.
- There are no known antidotes to these toxins. Medical care is supportive.

**You cannot tell if a bloom is toxic by looking at it.**

# What we know about exposure to blue-green algae and cyanotoxins and possible health effects

Information about human health effects from exposure to blue-green algae and toxins is primarily derived from a few epidemiology studies of recreational exposures; studies with laboratory animals; reports of extreme human exposure events, such as the use of toxin-contaminated dialysis water; and from animal (e.g., cattle and pet dog) exposures. References are available at: <http://www.cdc.gov/hab/links.htm>

Potential exposure route	Information source for possible symptoms and signs	Possible symptoms and signs
Swallowing water contaminated with blue-green algae (cyanobacteria) or toxins	Data from laboratory animal studies, extreme human exposure events, and animal exposures	<b>Hepatotoxins and nephrotoxins</b> Nausea, vomiting, diarrhea Bad taste in mouth Acute hepatitis, jaundice Blood in urine or dark urine Malaise, lethargic Headache, fever Loss of appetite  <b>Neurotoxins</b> Progression of muscle twitches For saxitoxin: high doses may lead to progressive muscle paralysis
Skin contact with water that is contaminated with blue-green algae or toxins	Data from human studies	Allergic dermatitis (including rash, itching and blisters) Conjunctivitis
Inhaling aerosols contaminated with blue-green algae or toxins	Anecdotal evidence from human exposures and data from human studies	Upper respiratory irritation (wheezing, coughing, chest tightness, shortness of breath)