

# UNDERSTANDING EXPOSURE AND HEALTH EFFECTS BLUE GREEN ALGAE



Health Department: 888 878-8992  
Environment Department: 505 827-0187



## 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 can, but not always:

- Produce toxins that are natural powerful poisons
- Make people, their pets and other animals sick
- Block sunlight and use up all the oxygen in the water, thereby killing 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.

# BLUE GREEN ALGAE

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

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

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

### 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.

### What should 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.

### 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.

### 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.

### 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.

### 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.

For health-related questions call the  
New Mexico Department of Health:  
888 878-8992  
Visit: [www.health.state.nm.us](http://www.health.state.nm.us)

For water related questions call the  
New Mexico Environment Department:  
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