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The Monitor

Blue-green Algae in Wisconsin

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July through September is peak season for growth of blue-green algae, or cyanobacteria, in Wisconsin's lakes. Blue-green algae are true bacteria that grow best at high temperatures, so late summer's warm waters offer them optimal growing conditions.

Blue-green algae are in every lake, river, and wetland in Wisconsin, but excessive or nuisance growths, known as blooms, are most likely to occur in water bodies containing excess nutrients that fertilize both plant and algae growth. Even in lakes with low to moderate nutrient levels, accumulations of blue-green algae may occasionally occur, especially when floating blue-green algae are concentrated close to shore by wind.



Filamentous green algae form long, hair-like strands that wrap around vegetation and other objects.

Floating mats of harmless filamentous green algae are often mistaken for blue-green algae. The easiest way to identify floating green "stuff" in a lake is to look at the texture. Filamentous green algae can grow very long and look like green strands of hair in the water. If you pick up some filaments, they will drape over your fingers like wet, green hair. Blue-green algae do not grow that long and the mats break up into small particles that can slip through your fingers.

Using color to identify blue-green algae can be unreliable. Despite their name, blue-green algae aren't always blue.

Actively growing blooms are usually green, and dense accumulations of tiny colonies of blue-green algae give lake water an opaque "pea soup" appearance or form surface scums. Vivid pigments are hidden in the cells until blooms or scums start to decompose. When blooms break down, colors including turquoise, red, purple, white, and brown may be seen, resembling paint spilled on the water's surface.

Blue-green algae, continued...

Blue-green algae present health concerns because some species can make toxins that cause illness in animals or people who swallow the algae in water or inhale the algae in water droplets. Skin contact may also cause rashes in some people. Even if blue-green algae can make toxins, they don't make them all the time. You cannot tell if a bloom is producing toxins just by looking at it, so it's common sense to be cautious about contact with any high concentration of blue-green algae. For a good rule of thumb, if you cannot see your feet in knee-deep water because the water is green and opaque or any other unusual color, or if scums are present, you should stay out, and always keep small children and pets out in these conditions. When blue-green algae are present at lower densities, you still want to avoid swallowing water because other pathogens may be present. When in doubt, stay out!



Blue-green algae release color pigments when they die and decompose.

For more information about blue-green algae:
<http://dnr.wi.gov/lakes/bluegreenalgae/>

- Avoid swimming, boating, water skiing, or jet skiing if water has an opaque, pea soup-like appearance, or if surface scums or foams are present, Keep dogs out too.
- Shower after swimming in any body of water, and wash dogs off as well.
- Algal toxins are more likely to accumulate in the organs and guts of fish, so discard those parts and stick to eating the fillet. Wash your hands after handling fish caught during blooms, and rinse fillets thoroughly before cooking or freezing.

Announcements

Report Blue-green Algae Illnesses

For health risk information or to report a human or animal illness potentially related to blue-green algal exposure:

<https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/water/bg-algae/index.htm>

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