



Cloudy Waters: Harmful Algal Blooms

Blue-green algae, or cyanobacteria, have found sanctuary in the calm lakes and ponds of New York and wreak havoc on native flora and fauna. These concentrations of bacteria, or blooms, often appear in warm, nutrient-rich waters that have high concentrations of phosphorus and nitrogen.

Blue-green algae can be identified by its slimy texture, appearing in floating mats of green, blue-green, yellow, brown, or red. The bacteria is often found in dense colonies at the surface of waterways, giving off the appearance of spilled paint.

Large colonies of blue-green algae can block sunlight from permeating the surface, impeding plant growth, and causing stagnation. This algae is can also be harmful to fish and other aquatic species, potentially leading to fish deaths if cyanobacteria populations are high.

Blue-green algae not only comes with an unpleasant presence, but can also cause serious health issues. Humans, pets, and livestock should avoid contact with water containing these algal blooms, as they may contain harmful toxins that can cause a variety of skin irritations, as well as nausea and vomiting.

Jesse Lepak, Fisheries and Ecosystem Health Specialist at New York Sea Grant, encourages people to be vigilant when participating in recreational activities to prevent exposure to HAB's, and report these sightings.

"The two things that people should do when they suspect a HAB is avoid any contact with the water, and report the bloom to the proper authority," said Jesse.

In order to limit your own exposure to blue-green algae, avoid swimming in waters that you suspect are experiencing HABs and keep your pets away from those waters as well, as consumption of the water or exposure can be harmful.



Harmful Algal Blooms change the appearance of water, often resulting in green coloration and limited water clarity.

Photo courtesy of Gregory L. Boyer.

"Dogs can be attracted to the odors that the HAB's emit, and exposure can be high when they clean their fur or drink contaminated water, so they can be particularly at risk," Jesse said.

"It is best for people and pets to avoid water contaminated with HAB's until the water is properly tested," said Jesse. "These measures are necessary when trying to prevent exposure."

Suspect algal blooms can be reported to the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation: at: https://www.dec.ny.gov/docs/water_pdf/suspalgformedit.pdf. Email the completed form and, if possible, attach digital photos (close-up and landscape to show extent and location) of the suspected bloom to HABsInfo@dec.ny.gov.

For more information about HAB's, and what you can do to help prevent their spread, please visit www.nyseagrant.org/habs.