

# Blue-Green Algae Blooms

## CYANOBACTERIA

### Blue-green Algae in New Mexico

Blue-green algae blooms are becoming common in New Mexico's lakes and reservoirs. This means people in New Mexico need to be on the look out when fishing and using lake and reservoirs for recreation because there could be health effects for people and pets. Also called cyanobacteria, and pond scum, these microscopic organisms are found naturally in all types of water, including fresh, brackish (combined salt and fresh water), marine water, and slow-moving streams when water is warm and stagnant.

### Blue-green Algae and Health

Blue-green algae can form blooms that can, but not always make people, their pets and other animals sick.

People and animals can come in contact with cyanobacteria and cyanotoxins that are in the environment by:

- drinking water that comes from a lake or reservoir that has a cyanobacteria bloom.
- swimming or doing other recreational activities in or on waters that have cyanobacteria blooms.

### The types of illnesses people and animals get from being exposed to blue-green algae include:

- 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.



The blooms can be blue, bright green, brown, or red. Blooms sometimes look like paint floating on the water's surface. Some cyanobacteria blooms can look like foam, scum, or mats.

- 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.

### Protect Yourself

To protect yourself, and family from cyanobacteria:

- Don't swim, water ski, or boat in areas where the water is discolored or where you see foam, scum, or mats of algae on the water surface.
- Do not allow children or pets to play in or drink scummy water.
- If you do swim in water that might contain harmful cyanobacteria, rinse off with fresh water as soon as possible afterward.
- Don't drink the water.
- Follow any water-body closures announced by local authorities.

## What to Do If You Come in Contact With Blue Green-Algae

If you or your pet comes in contact with a cyanobacteria, **wash yourself and your pet thoroughly with fresh water.** Other steps include:

- If you or your pet swallow water from where there is a harmful algae bloom, call your doctor, a Poison Center, or a veterinarian.
- Call a veterinarian if your animal shows any of the following symptoms of cyanobacteria poisoning: loss of appetite, loss of energy, vomiting, stumbling and falling, foaming at the mouth, diarrhea, convulsions, excessive drooling, tremors and seizures, or any other unexplained sickness after being in contact with water.
- There are no known antidotes to these toxins but medical care can help.

Small animals and children are most prone to health effects 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.

### Blue-Green Algae Basics

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.

You might or might not be able to see cyanobacteria blooms. Blooms sometimes stay below the water's surface, and sometimes float to the surface. As a safety measure, 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. If you are fishing, it is usually okay to eat the fish in moderation and avoid eating the guts of the fish, where accumulation of toxins may occur.

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.



**Dogs will get in a body of water even if it looks or smells bad, including when it contains cyanobacteria. Dogs are also more likely to drink the contaminated water. If pets (especially dogs) swim in scummy water, rinse them off immediately. Do not let them lick the algae off their fur.**

### Preventing Blooms

Harmful cyanobacteria blooms may affect the environment by blocking the sunlight that other organisms need to live and can steal the oxygen and nutrients other organisms need to live. New Mexicans can help blue-green algae from forming in lakes and reservoirs by:

- Using only the recommended amounts of fertilizers on yards and gardens to reduce the amount that runs off into the environment.
- Properly maintaining household septic systems.
- Maintaining a buffer of natural vegetation around ponds and lakes to filter incoming water.

### Learn More and Get Health Tips:

Visit <https://nmtracking.org>, which is a New Mexico Department Health resource for environmental public health and data.

<https://nmtracking.org>



New Mexico Department of Health  
Epidemiology and Response Division