

News release

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Public health officials promote water awareness as algae bloom season approaches

This month many Oregon lake managers will start to monitor for cyanobacteria, a signal that algae bloom season is on its way.

Algae are microscopic organisms that grow naturally in the ocean and fresh waters. Under certain conditions, algae can rapidly grow into a large mass in the water. Most algae are harmless but cyanobacteria, or blue-green algae, can produce toxins capable of causing illness in people and animals.

When an algae bloom is detected and lab results show that cyanobacteria is present, the Oregon Harmful Algae Bloom Surveillance (HABS) program issues a health advisory warning people to stay out of affected water to avoid illness.

Jennifer Ketterman, HABS program coordinator, emphasizes that the HABS program does not close lakes, but does issue advisories to inform people of a potential health risk.

People and animals can be exposed to these toxins in several ways: through contact with bloom-affected water while wading or playing in the water, swallowing affected water when swimming, or inhaling water droplets while enjoying high-speed activities like water-skiing. Exposure can result in a range of symptoms including skin rash, diarrhea, cramps, vomiting, numbness, dizziness and fainting. Children, people with weakened immune systems and pets are most vulnerable to illness.

(more)

During the past 10 years, Oregon has seen a steady increase in the number of algae blooms that triggered the issuance of a health advisory. In 2005, five such advisories were issued for fresh water bodies in three counties. Last year, the number increased to 22 advisories in nine counties. It is not known why there has been an increase.

Ketterman cautions, however, that only a fraction of Oregon's fresh waters are monitored, and the public won't always be notified about all harmful algae blooms. "For this reason, people should always be aware of conditions before they go into the water," she said. "If it is foamy, scummy, and thick like paint and pea-green, blue-green or brownish-red in color, it's best to stay out."

In 2009 and again in 2010, confirmed dog deaths due to algae toxins were reported to the HABS program.

Dogs become exposed when they drink bloom-affected water or when they lick their fur after swimming in the water. Once toxins are in the animals' system, illness occurs quite rapidly and there is little that can be done beyond providing supportive care. The HABS program made specific efforts last year to reach veterinarians and pet owners, Ketterman said. "We want people to be aware so they know to keep their pets out of potentially dangerous water."

The HABS program is funded through a federal grant from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The program relies on local, state and federal agencies that manage water bodies to alert it when a potentially toxic bloom has been detected.

Additional information about harmful algae blooms or the HABS program can be found on the [HABS website](#) at or by calling 971-673-0400. Or you can sign up to receive health advisories by email on the [HABS website](#).

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