Idaho Department of Environmental Quality

Harmful Algal Blooms

FAQs

What causes a harmful algal bloom?

Cyanobacteria occur naturally in the environment and are a vital part of the ecosystem. A harmful algal bloom occurs when excessive growth cyanobacteria exists, which has the potential to produce toxins. Abundant nutrients (phosphorus and nitrogen), sunny conditions, warm temperatures, and low-flow or low-water conditions can contribute to exponential growth resulting in algal blooms.

When is a health advisory issued for a harmful algal bloom?

When a harmful algal bloom is suspected, the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) will collect a water sample from the affected water body and send it to a lab for analysis. Health advisories are issued for a water body when the number of cells in the water is above a level recommended as unsafe for recreating.

What about other types of algae?

Algae in our lakes, ponds, and streams are an essential component of the food web and a healthy aquatic ecosystem. Algae have many forms and colors, and most do not produce toxins. Cyanobacteria are the exception, and when algae blooms, toxins can be produced.

When a health advisory is issued, is the entire water body unsafe for recreational use?

Algae blooms are known to be very patchy in nature. Higher densities may be present in areas not surveyed, particularly along shorelines. The density of a harmful algal bloom can change with wind direction and temperature. Regardless of whether a health advisory is in effect, recreational users should avoid contact with water whenever surface concentrations of cyanobacteria are evident or when the lake has scums with obvious green to blue-green appearance.

What does a harmful algal bloom look like?

The physical appearance of a harmful algal bloom can be unsightly, often presenting discolored water, streaks, or globs of scum, and causing thick green mats along shorelines. Blooms can vary in appearance, often looking like pollen, grass clippings, spilled paint, mats, foam, or a dense surface scum, and can range in color from blue and bright green to brown, red, and even white. Some blooms may produce a foul odor.

Can I swim and undertake other watersports when a harmful algal bloom is in process?

Swimming and water sports, including waterskiing, or other activities that result in direct contact

with affected water are not recommended.

What should I do if I come into contact with affected lake water when a harmful algal bloom is in process?

If contact with an affected water body does occur, users should remove any affected clothing and wash themselves thoroughly with clean water after coming ashore.

What are some of the symptoms?

Symptoms of exposure to toxins vary according to exposure. Exposure is most likely through contact with skin, ingestion, and inhalation. Symptoms include rashes, hives, diarrhea, vomiting, coughing, or wheezing. More severe symptoms affecting the liver and nervous system may result from longer or greater amounts of exposure. If symptoms persist, consult your local health care provider.

Is it safe for pets and other animals to access water when a harmful algal bloom is in process?

Harmful algal blooms may produce toxins that could kill or sicken pets. Do not allow your pet to swim in or drink water that may have a bloom, and thoroughly clean or throw away pet toys that were exposed to the bloom. After swimming in water, pet's fur can contain toxins and can be ingested when the pet cleans and licks fur. If pets do come into contact with a harmful bloom, rinse them off immediately. Livestock owners are reminded to continue to check stock water supplies for cyanobacteria and to remove stock from foreshores when cyanobacteria are present in the water body.

Can I eat fish from affected areas?

Any fish caught should be cleaned and washed thoroughly in uncontaminated water and any internal organs disposed of before consumption. If people choose to eat fish, it is recommended they remove all fat, skin, and organs before cooking, since toxins are more likely to collect in those tissues.

How will the public know when conditions are safe again?

The public will be advised when levels have returned to normal and toxin levels are below the safety threshold. The public should always avoid contact with and ingesting water from surface water with a scum layer that they are unfamiliar with or when the water has an unsightly color.

What do I do if I observe surface water with a scum layer or when the water has an unsightly color?

Call DEQ at (208) 373-0502 to report a potential harmful algal bloom, and you will be directed to the appropriate regional office. Download the bloomWatch app to learn what to look for and report a bloom to DEQ. DEQ bases responses on calls received by the public and relies on public observation for identifying potential harmful algal blooms.

For additional information, visit
www.deq.idaho.gov/recreation-health-advisories.