

DEQ Issues Advisory on Blue-Green Algae Blooms

The Montana Department of Environmental Quality advises people to avoid swimming in ponds, lakes, or reservoirs that seem stagnated and harbor large quantities of algae. Mid-summer hot weather can trigger outbreaks, or blooms, of potentially toxic blue-green algae.

Blue-green algae, or cyanobacteria, can reproduce rapidly in standing fresh water when sunlight, temperature, and nutrient levels are high. Within a few days a clear lake, pond, or ditch can become cloudy with algal growth. Potentially toxic blue-green algae can occur throughout Montana in lakes, reservoirs, stock ponds, or roadside ditches. These types of blooms are not normally found in moving waters, such as streams, irrigation canals, and springs. Because they require sunlight, the blooms do not occur in wells.

A bloom may appear similar to bright green latex paint floating on the water. However, it can also appear bluish, brownish, or reddish-green, or even look like grass clippings in the water. A bloom is comprised of extremely small organisms usually suspended in water or forming floating mats that can be several inches thick near the shoreline.

In most cases in Montana the algae is not toxic. Only certain species are capable of producing toxins, and even these remain harmless most of the time. Nonetheless, certain blue-green algae can, and have, sickened or killed pets, waterfowl, and other animals, including livestock. They can also cause serious illness in humans.

Signs of a toxic bloom may include the presence of dead fish, waterfowl or other animals, or a sudden unexplained illness or death of a pet, especially if it has algae on its mouth, legs or feet. The definitive test for water suspected of harboring toxic algae is to inject samples into a laboratory animal. Harmless strains of algae and active toxic strains look very similar under a microscope.

If you suspect a bloom in standing waters, keep children, pets, and livestock away.