

NEWS RELEASE

For Immediate Release:
June 22, 2017

For More Information, Contact:

Mike Ell
Environmental Health Section
Phone: 701.328.5210
E-mail: mell@nd.gov

OR

North Dakota Department of
Agriculture, Animal Health Division
Phone: 701.328.2655

State Departments of Health and Agriculture Urge Residents to Avoid Blue-green Algae

BISMARCK, N.D. – Hot summer weather can contribute to the production of blue-green algae (cyanobacteria) in bodies of water that are used by people, pets and livestock. Blue-green algae discolor the water and can cause foam, scum or mats to appear on the surface. When severe blooms occur, the water can have the appearance of spilled green paint or green pea soup.

Blue-green algae can also produce toxins in the water called cyanotoxins. People and animals that swallow water containing cyanotoxins can become sick. Symptoms include diarrhea and vomiting; numb lips; tingling fingers and toes; dizziness; or rashes, hives or skin blisters. In severe cases, cyanotoxins can result in death. There are no known antidotes for the cyanotoxins produced by blue-green algae. Children are at higher risk than adults for illness because they can ingest a higher dose of toxin relative to their smaller size. The North Dakota Department of Health (NDDoH) can test water for toxins and, if they are detected, issue advisories to the public. However, because it can take time to test the water, people are urged to err on the side of caution and avoid waters that look discolored or scummy, or that have a foul odor.

“This summer we have already had several reports of livestock deaths linked to blue-green algae blooms and cyanotoxin poisoning,” said Mike Ell with the NDDoH Division of Water Quality. Recent reports of blue-green algae blooms in Stanley Pond in Mountrail County and Harvey Reservoir in Wells County have prompted officials to issue exposure advisories at those recreational areas.

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The NDDoH and North Dakota Department of Agriculture, Animal Health Division, urge the public to avoid contact with or swallowing water contaminated by blue-green algae, and to protect pets and livestock from waters that are affected.

According to Ell, “An advisory is issued to remind people that these blooms are most common in North Dakota in late summer, but it only takes a few hot days to trigger a bloom. Exposure can cause people and animals to become ill.”

“Whether it’s blue-green algae or toxic water due to increased salts and sulfates, cattle can develop adverse clinical signs, including death,” said Dr. Michelle Mostrom with NDSU’s Veterinary Diagnostic Lab. “A primary factor in these deaths is that cyanobacteria blooms can occur quickly, within a day, and it’s difficult for livestock producers to check water quality daily or every other day, which is very important in cases of cyanotoxin poisoning caused by cyanobacterial blooms. Some of these cyanotoxins are quick neurotoxins and can kill livestock in a few minutes to a few hours; no treatment will be effective after the toxin has been quickly absorbed.”

The NDDoH and the Department of Agriculture, Animal Health Division, recommends these steps to avoid exposure to cyanotoxins:

- Respect advisories announced by public health authorities.
- Do not swim, water ski, or boat in areas where the water is discolored or where you see foam, scum or mats of green or blue-green algae on the water.
- If you accidentally swim in water that might have a cyanobacteria bloom, rinse off with fresh water as soon as possible.
- Do not let pets or livestock swim in or drink from areas where the water is discolored or where you see foam, scum, or mats of algae.
- If pets (especially dogs) swim in scummy water, rinse them off immediately – do not let them lick the algae (and toxins) off.
- Do not irrigate lawns or golf courses with pond water that looks scummy or smells bad.

For more information about the effects of blue-green algae blooms on pets and livestock, contact the Animal Health Division, North Dakota Department of Agriculture at 701.328.2655. For more information on public health issues or to report a suspected blue-green algae bloom, visit the NDDoH Harmful Algal Blooms (HABs) website at www.tinyurl.com/nodakhabs or contact the North Dakota Department of Health, Division of Water Quality at 701.328.5210.

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600 E. Boulevard Ave. Dept. 301, Bismarck, North Dakota 58505-0200
Phone: 701.328.2372 Fax: 701.328.4727E-mail: health@nd.gov

Visit the health department home page at www.ndhealth.gov.