

Staying Safe and Healthy in Wisconsin's Lakes

What You Need to Know about Blue-Green Algae

With over 15,000 lakes, Wisconsin is a prime destination for summer fun. Learn what you can do to keep your lake visit safe and healthy by protecting yourself and your family from the harmful effects of blue-green algae.

What are blue-green algae?

- Blue-green algae are photosynthetic bacteria known as *cyanobacteria* and are a natural part of water bodies.
- With enough sunlight and nutrients, cyanobacteria can grow to high levels and form a blue-green algae *bloom*.
- Blooms are often smelly, look like spilled paint or pea soup, and can change the color of the water to green, blue, turquoise, purple, tan, or white. Some blooms form a layer of scum or mats on the surface of the water.
- While some blooms can stay in the same location for a long time, others can quickly come and go with changing currents and wind patterns. Blooms usually form during the summer months in Wisconsin, or May–September.
- **Blue-green algae blooms can produce toxins that can make people and animals sick after they swallow, breathe in, or have contact with the water.**

How can I keep myself, my family, and my pets safe at the lake?

- When searching for a spot to swim, choose the clearest water possible. Avoid water that:



Looks like spilled latex paint



Looks like green pea soup



Is discolored or streaky



Has small green dots floating in it



Has floating scum, globs, or mats



Has dead fish or other animals

- Always shower off after swimming in lakes, rivers, and ponds.
- If dogs swim in scummy water, rinse them off with fresh, clean water and don't let them lick algae off their fur.
- Don't swim or allow your pets to swim in places where beach closure or water quality notices are posted.
- Try not to swallow the water. Besides blue-green algae, lake, river, and pond water can contain other bacteria and parasites that can make you sick if you swallow it. Always use safe water for drinking!



How can I tell if what I'm seeing are blue-green algae, or something else?

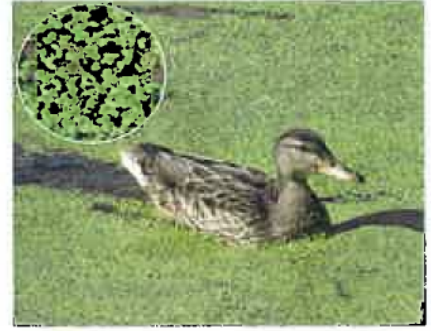
Blooms have look-alikes! These conditions do not produce toxins and are NOT harmful:



True algae (green algae)



Yellow plant pollen



Tiny aquatic plants (duckweed)

To determine whether what you're seeing are true algae or blue-green algae, you can conduct the jar or stick test. Remember to wear rubber or latex gloves for protection!

The Jar Test

- With gloves on, use a glass jar to collect a sample just below the surface of the water (avoid collecting just the top layer of scum).
- Fill the jar about three-quarters full (leave room at the top for gas production). Wipe any scum off the outside of the jar and screw the lid on. Give it a shake.
- Leave the jar in a location where the contents will not be disturbed for 2–3 hours.
- After 2 or 3 hours, observe the jar to see where the algae have settled. Algae that sink to the bottom are likely true algae, and algae that form a greenish ring at the top of the water are likely blue-green algae (cyanobacteria).



While cyanobacteria float, true algae sink.

The Stick Test

- With gloves on, push a long, sturdy stick into the surface of the algal material and slowly lift it out of the water.
- If the stick comes out looking like it has been dipped into a can of paint, the material is likely blue-green algae. If it comes out with long, green, hair-like strands or threads, the material is probably true algae (filamentous green algae).
- While accumulations of filamentous green algae may be a nuisance in a lake, they are not a health hazard.



Green algae are not harmful.

**These tests may help you determine if you have higher levels of blue-green in your lake, but they don't tell you whether or not the blue-green algae are actually producing toxins. When in doubt, it's best to keep out!*

How can I report a bloom I see in Wisconsin?

Email the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources at DNRHABS@wisconsin.gov to report a bloom and ask questions about blooms and bloom mitigation strategies. Be sure to include descriptions of bloom size, duration, and location with lake name, town name, and county name. Include photos taken both close up and farther away.

What if someone goes in water experiencing a bloom?

- They should immediately shower off with fresh, clean water.
- Monitor for sudden signs of blue-green algae-related illness, such as:
 - ◆ Vomiting
 - ◆ Diarrhea
 - ◆ Headache
 - ◆ Abdominal pain
 - ◆ Cough
 - ◆ Sore throat
 - ◆ Skin rash
 - ◆ Blistering
- Seek medical care if symptoms occur or call the Wisconsin Poison Center at 800-222-1222 for advice. If pets become suddenly ill with signs of poisoning, bring them to a veterinarian immediately.
- Report blue-green algae-related illnesses to your local health department.