



Fact Sheet

Harmful Algal Blooms: How to Recreate Safely in Summer

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SACRAMENTO – With spring in full swing, Californian’s are getting outdoors and recreating in our beautiful waterways. However, warmer temperatures create a ripe environmental for algal blooms to increase in our waterways. The State Water Resources Control Board is asking the public to be mindful of freshwater harmful algal blooms (HABs) in lakes, reservoirs, rivers, and streams, as they can cause illness and are especially harmful to children and pets.

To learn how to stay safe, report a bloom, and track multiple blooms statewide, visit our web portal (https://mywaterquality.ca.gov/habs/where/freshwater_events.html). Most harmful algal blooms are formed by cyanobacteria, small microbes that live in nearly every habitat on land and in the water. Increased water temperatures, slow moving water, and excessive nutrients cause cyanobacteria to rapidly multiply and form these harmful blooms that can produce toxins. The drought conditions that many areas of the state are experiencing, also drives the growth of these HABs in waterways with lower than normal water levels. They can be found near the surface of lakes and reservoirs. Harmful blooms can be a variety of colors such as green, white, red or brown and may look like thick paint floating or small flakes on the water. Cyanobacteria can also attach to rocks in rivers and streams. Some of these mats attached to the river or stream bottom can become dislodged and found along the shorelines.

The California Water Boards recommend that people practice healthy water habits while enjoying the outdoors this summer at your local lake, river or stream:

- Heed all instructions on posted advisories if present
- Avoid algae and scum in the water and on the shore
- Keep an eye on children and pets
- If you think a harmful algal bloom is present, do not let pets and other animals go into or drink the water or eat scum/algal accumulations on the shore
- Don’t drink the water or use it for cooking
- Wash yourself, your family and your pets with clean water after water play
- If you catch fish, throw away guts and clean fillets with tap water or bottled water before cooking
- Avoid eating shellfish if you think a harmful algal bloom is present





Figure 1. Harmful Algal Bloom observed by boat at Hensley Lake August 2021

Because cyanobacteria can produce toxins, they have the potential to harm the environment, people, pets, wildlife or livestock. Dogs and children are most likely to be affected because of their smaller body size, increased potential to swallow water while swimming, and tendency to stay in the water longer. Recreational exposure to cyanobacteria and associated toxins can cause eye irritation, skin rash, mouth ulcers, vomiting, diarrhea and cold and flu-like symptoms.

Dogs are especially susceptible because they tend to drink while in the water and lick their fur afterward, increasing their risk of exposure and illness. Symptoms with animals include vomiting or diarrhea, lethargy, abnormal liver function test results, difficulty breathing, foaming at the mouth, muscle twitching, and sometimes death. A quick fact sheet is available to help inform dog owners at: (<https://oehha.ca.gov/media/downloads/risk-assessment/fact-sheet/dogownerfactsheet2018.pdf>).

Get medical treatment immediately if you think that you, your pet, or livestock has gotten sick after going in the water. Be sure to alert the medical professional to the possible contact with cyanobacteria. Also, make sure to contact the local county public health department. To report a bloom, do one of the following:

- Fill out the Bloom Report form on the portal
- Email: CyanoHAB.reports@waterboards.ca.gov
- Call the HABs hotline: 1-844-729-6466 (toll free)

Enjoy the summer months and beautiful waterways California has to offer. But remember, when in doubt, please keep out. For more information about HABs, please visit: California Harmful Algal Blooms Portal: <https://mywaterquality.ca.gov/habs/index.html>.