

Blue-Green Algae Talking Points

- Blue-green algae blooms, also called cyanobacteria, are showing up more frequently in freshwater lakes, rivers and streams around the state this summer, in part due to the drought and heat.
- The blooms can produce toxins that pose a health risk if ingested. Children and pets are particularly vulnerable, but adults can also experience eye irritation, allergic skin rash, mouth ulcers, vomiting, diarrhea, and cold and flu-like symptoms. Ongoing daily exposures can lead to more serious effects.
- Serious injury to the liver, kidney and nervous system may occur with higher exposures. Many pets and other animals have died from this type of exposure in California because they tend to drink water and ingest algae when visiting these waters. The algae blooms can appear as blue-green, white or brown foam, scum or mats that can float on the water's surface and accumulate along the shoreline and boat ramp areas.
- The blooms occur in stagnant or slow moving warm water with high levels of nutrients in the water. The blooms can move, grow or shrink depending on conditions, so recreational water users should be on the lookout for them.
- Not all algae produce toxins, and toxins are not present in all blue-green algae blooms. The lab testing process takes time, and water users should exercise caution.
- Recreational water users should be cautious about swimming, drinking or cooking with water from areas with noticeable algal blooms, and should keep out of the water if toxins are reported to be above safe limits. Water users should check for advisory signs in areas where sampling has identified toxins present. Recreational water should not be used for activities like drinking, cooking and washing dishes. Common water purification techniques (e.g., camping filters, tablets and boiling) do not remove toxins.
- People should not eat mussels and other bi-valves like clams and oysters collected in areas where blooms have been identified. Local advisory signs may also recommend against eating fish caught from the bloom waters. If people do eat the fish, the guts and liver should be removed, and the filet washed with clean drinking water.
- It is recommended that California public water systems refer to USEPA's health advisories for cyanotoxins and associated guidance in managing cyanotoxins. Much of the pathogen removal treatment technology already in place will likely contribute to the reduction of toxins. However, in some instances secondary contaminants from algae blooms, such as geosmin and 2-methylisoborneol (MIB) may cause the water to have a musty taste and earthy smell, but the water is still safe to drink. The State Water Board's Division of Drinking Water is not aware of any problems with CA drinking water related to algae blooms.
- Medical treatment should be sought immediately if a person, pet or livestock might have been exposed to blue-green algae toxins. They should alert the medical professional to the possible contact with blue-green algae.