

Healthy Beaches: Protect Yourself from Blue-Green Algae (Cyanobacteria)

What are blue-green algae?

Blue-green algae, or cyanobacteria, thrive in both freshwater and saltwater environments. Commonly referred to as pond scum, they flourish in warm, shallow, and slow-moving waters, where they can multiply rapidly and form blooms.

What are blue-green algae blooms?

Blue-green algae blooms are clumps of algae found in lakes, ponds, and marshes. They often appear blue-green but may also look bright green, blue, grey, tan, or red, and can resemble thick pea soup with a 'rotten egg' smell.

What causes a blue-green algae bloom?

No single factor causes a blue-green algae bloom. Blooms are more likely to occur during hot, sunny weather, in calm water that is rich in phosphorus and nitrogen.

Will contact with blue-green algae make me sick?

Contact with blue-green algae can cause skin and eye irritation, allergic reactions, or rashes. Some species produce toxins that may be harmful to both humans and animals. Swallowing contaminated water can lead to symptoms such as nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, and stomach cramps. If you experience any health effects after exposure, seek medical attention.

Is it safe to drink water that has blue-green algae in it? Can I cook or bathe in the water? Can I water my garden with the water?

Do not drink, cook with or bathe in untreated water that may be contaminated with blue-green algae, as its toxins are invisible, odourless, and tasteless.

Municipal treatment systems typically remove blue-green algae and toxins through filtration and chlorination. However, untreated or residential systems may not offer the same protection. Use an alternate water source for drinking, cooking, and bathing if your supply is not treated.

Boiling water does not remove blue-green algae toxins; in fact, it can cause the cells to rupture, potentially releasing more toxins into the water. Avoid using water from areas with blue-green algae blooms on edible plants, as the toxins can contaminate produce and make it unsafe to eat.

What precautions should be taken when a Blue-Green Algae bloom is present?

- Avoid contact with water under a swimming advisory or where algae blooms or surface scum are visible- even if an advisory has not been issued;
- If you come into contact with a bloom, rinse off with clean water or shower as soon as possible;
- Wash clothing, swim wear, and gear that has come into contact with blue-green algae;
- Keep children from swimming in or drinking water where algae is present;
- Avoid water activities like water skiing, tubing, or wake surfing in areas with visible algae;
- Do not use water contaminated with blue-green algae for watering lawns, gardens, or crops;
- Keep pets and livestock away from contaminated water. If they drink it, they risk serious illness or death.
- Avoid eating fish from lakes with algae blooms. Toxins can build up in their organs and make you sick. If you choose to eat fish, stick to the fillet. Discard the skin, fat, and internal organs where toxins can concentrate, and rinse the fillet well before cooking.

Recreational areas of water bodies may be tested when blue-green algae blooms are present. If toxin levels exceed safe limits, the local health authority will issue a public swimming advisory, warning people to avoid the water until the advisory is lifted.

Review water quality reports on the Healthy Beaches Program website before heading to the beach:

saskatchewan.ca/residents/environment-public-health-and-safety/environmental-health/healthy-beach-program

For more information, contact your local public health inspection office. A list of offices can be found here:

saskatchewan.ca/residents/health/public-health/public-health-inspectors