

BE AWARE



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Harmful Algal Blooms (HABs) ...

What is a Harmful Algal Bloom?

HABs are so named because many of these blooms may produce poisons (or toxins) that can cause illness, irritation or even death. While HABs are commonly referred to as “blue-green algae,” they are not true algae. They are actually cyanobacteria.

HABs have been observed worldwide including Lake Erie and other Pennsylvania waters and can occur almost anywhere: lakes, ponds, stormwater retention basins, rivers, streams, or reservoirs.

How dangerous are HABs?

Humans, pets, livestock and wildlife that come into contact with, or ingest HAB toxins can experience sickness, paralysis or even death.

Know the signs of HAB poisoning:

- Humans: rashes, blisters and hives, and eye and nose irritations. If swallowed, diarrhea, vomiting, abdominal pain, numbness of lips, tingling in fingers and toes, dizziness, headache.
- Pets/livestock/wildlife: staggering, difficulty breathing, convulsions, salivation, weakness, and vomiting.

How will I know if there is a HAB?

Confirmation of HABs can only be made under a microscope. HABs generally occur from late summer into early fall when water temperatures are warmest and an abundance of sunlight and nutrients are available.

Check for posted HAB advisories or ask the park manager about any recent HABs because colorless toxins can still be in the water after visible blooms have faded.

Always look for HABs before going in the water.

HABs have different colors and looks. Some colors are green, blue-green, brown, black, white, purple, red and black. They can look like film, crust or puff balls at the surface, grass clippings, or dots in the water. Some HABs look like spilled paint, pea soup, foam, wool, or streaks.

What should I do if I see a HAB?

- Stay out of water that may have a HAB.
- Don't let children or pets play in HAB debris on shore.
- After swimming/wading in water, even with no visible HABs, rinse off with fresh water as soon as possible.
- NEVER swallow untreated surface water. It may contain algal toxins or other bacteria, parasites, or viruses that could cause illness if consumed.
- Do not let pets lick or eat HAB material from their fur.
- Don't drink/cook with suspected water. In-home treatments like boiling, chlorine bleach or water filtration units offer no protection from HAB toxins!
- See a doctor if you or your children might be ill from HAB toxins. Contact your veterinarian for sick pets.

What about fishing and other activities?

Consider minimal consumption of fish fillets from water bodies with HAB events. Research indicates toxin levels are highest in internal organs but can be found in fillets. At a minimum, remove the skin and wash fillets thoroughly before cooking, being sure not to use HAB affected water.

Other activities near the water such as camping, biking, picnicking, and hiking are safe. If you are picnicking, and have had contact with suspected water or shore debris, be sure to wash your hands before handling food.

Where can I report a bloom or find more information?

Report a bloom to: The Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (PADEP) at 814-332-6839

For more information, visit www.paseagrant.org