



Manitoba Association of Cottage Owners

Health and Safety

Blue-Green Algae Poisoning

Updated: September 11, 2015

Issue: Public Health Risk – Blue-Green Algae Poisoning

Background to the Issue:

- Blue-green Algae Poisoning is an uncommon poisoning caused by the ingestion of a toxin produced by algae known as *Cyanobacteria* which grow in lake or pond water when the environmental conditions are favourable.
- The algae are usually brilliant “blue-green” but can range in colour from olive-green to red.
- The blooms occur across Canada, and mostly appear in the hot summer months.
- These “blooms” are sometimes referred to as “pond scum” and may have a definite disagreeable odour.
- Cyanobacteria can produce toxins which attack the liver, or the nervous system, and/or cause skin irritation.
- The toxins, once they are produced can be quite stable in the water body where they are produced, so still, stagnant water can harbour them for some time.

Cautionary Notes:

- Do not allow pets or humans to swim in water bodies with floating mats of “pond scum”.
- Do not consume water taken from water sources containing algae growth.
- Boiling does not destroy the toxic principal in the water once it is contaminated, therefore do not use for cooking.
- Do not use contaminated water for bathing, as it may cause skin irritation.
- Algae poisoning is not contagious from person to person or animal to animal.
- Testing of water can done by a limited number of water quality testing laboratories.
- There is no vaccine available.
- The toxin can cause liver damage, and may also affect the nervous system.
- Treatments to counteract the effects of the toxin in animals have not been extensively investigated to date.

Policy or Program Implications: What is current Policy or Program for this issue?

- Most municipalities with a history of blooms monitor their water supplies for cyanobacteria.
- Be vigilant and if recreational or drinking water sources appear to support blue-green algae growth, take precautions to protect the health of humans and animals as outlined above.
- Health Canada is studying the issue with a mandate to ensure that safe drinking water standards are maintained and that testing capability will be eventually be available across Canada.

Action Taken by MACO:

- MACO supports and collaborates with several research organizations who are studying the problem of algae blooms on Manitoba lakes and rivers, with a view to eventually determining the factors which cause them and possibly establishing guidelines to ameliorate the problem.

MACO's Recommendations for the Future:

- Visit the following website for Health Canada information:
http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/ewh-semt/pubs/water-eau/cyanobacterial_toxins/index-eng.php
- Check the MediaBulletin website of the Chief Provincial Public Health Officer, Province of Manitoba at <http://news.gov.mb.ca/news/index.html>. Simply put "blue-green algae" in the "search" box on the web page and click on "search" and recent bulletins will come up.
- For more information you may contact your doctor, your local Public Health Unit or Health Links-Info Sante at 1-888-315-9257 or 204-788-8200.
- If you experience symptoms, see your doctor and advise him or her of the possible contact with blue-green algae.
- If your pets become ill after encountering algae blooms, get them to your veterinarian as soon as possible – liver damage can be very severe immediately.

Position of MACO:

- Be aware and take precautions when possible.
- Follow recommendations of health officials.

Warning Re Botulism:

- Blue-green algae toxins can cause death losses in wild birds and animals.
- Rotting carcasses may allow botulism toxins to develop and maggots from blowflies may consume the toxins.
- Scavengers and pets who may consume those maggots can suffer botulism poisoning.
- **Be aware what your pets encounter in the outdoors and if they should become ill with strange symptoms, get to your local veterinarian as soon as possible.**