



What are cyanobacteria?

Cyanobacteria, also known as blue-green algae or pond scum, have cells that can produce toxins that are a health concern to humans and animals.

They are not really algae, but bacteria. Cyanobacteria have been around for thousands of years. They are a worldwide problem and are found in nearly every environment.

Normally, they are barely visible but when conditions become favourable, they may form visible blooms. Harmful algae blooms can occur anytime of the year but are most common between June and September when water temperatures are higher.



If you live near where a bloom has been observed.

Exposure can be through drinking the water, skin contact or inhalation of droplets.

If you swallow the water, you may vomit, get diarrhea or have cramps and nausea.

If you come in contact with the toxins, your skin may be irritated. It may appear as an itch, redness or skin rash. In more severe cases, you can get mouth and nose ulcers, eye and ear irritation, and blistering of the lips.

Long-term toxin exposure at high levels may cause liver damage and nervous system damage.

Are some people at greater risk?

Yes. Children, toddlers, someone with liver disease, kidney damage or weakened immune systems are at higher risk.

Can my pets drink contaminated water?

No. Pets and livestock have died from drinking water containing toxic cyanobacteria.



I do not see any cyanobacteria in the water. Is the water safe?

Blooms continually change and are difficult to predict. Even when a bloom has disappeared, toxins may persist. This is why lake water samples tested at one specific time and location may not represent the water quality hours later.

I get my drinking water from the lake, and I have my own water treatment device. Is the water safe to drink during a cyanobacterial bloom?

No. Small-scale treatment devices have not been tested by the manufacturer to ensure cyanobacteria and their toxins are effectively removed. Therefore, we cannot recommend a specific water treatment system.

A deep drinking water intake does not eliminate the risk. When cyanobacteria die, they sink to the bottom, potentially releasing toxins at the intake level. The only recommendation we can give at this time is to use an alternate source of water.



What about recreational activities and bathing?

If a bloom is present, avoid swimming and other recreational water activities.

Can I eat fish from water with a cyanobacterial bloom?

Limit the amount of fish you eat as some toxins can build up in fish flesh. Do not eat the fish organs. Be careful not to cut the organs when filleting.

Can I water my vegetable garden during a cyanobacterial bloom?

No, do not use the water for vegetables as the plants may absorb the toxin.



Who should I call if I see a cyanobacterial bloom?

Call the Ontario Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks Spills Action Centre at 1-866-663-8477.

You can also report an incident online.

<https://www.ontario.ca/page/report-pollution-and-spills>



What to do and things to avoid

- Be aware of areas with thick clumps of blue-green algae and avoid any direct contact.
- Do not wade or swim in water with algae blooms.
- Do not drink the water and avoid any situation that could lead to swallowing the water.
- If you do come in contact with the algae bloom, rinse off with fresh water as soon as possible.
- Keep children and animals away from the water where algae blooms and their toxins have been identified.

Resources

1. Recreational water quality and health: Cyanobacteria and their toxins (Government of Canada)
<https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/environment/recreational-water/cyanobacteria-toxins.html>
2. Toxic cyanobacteria in water-Second edition, World Health Organization
<https://www.who.int/publications/m/item/toxic-cyanobacteria-in-water---second-edition>
3. Harmful Algal Bloom (HAB)-Associated Illness, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
<https://www.cdc.gov/habs/>

North Bay: 705-474-1400 extension 5400

Parry Sound: 705-746-5801

Toll-free: 1-800-563-2808