

July 9, 2010

Summer is Here and So is Toxic Algae

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Part of summer fun is visiting local lakes, swimming and boating. But before you participate in these enjoyable activities, you should know if a toxic algae alert has been issued for the lake you plan to visit.

What is toxic algae? It's strains of cyanobacteria that produce a poison that can make you or your pets sick. Toxic algae may be the result of the right combination of water temperature, low water depths, and nutrients (such as high nitrogen and phosphorus concentrations).

Toxic algae usually has a heavy surface growth of pea-green colored clumps, scum or streaks, and smells bad. It can have a thickness similar to motor oil and often looks like thick paint in the water.

Algae blooms are usually near the shoreline where pets and toddlers have easy access and the water is shallow and more stagnant. It's important to keep a watchful eye on children and pets to make sure they don't go in the water.

Symptoms from skin contact are rashes, lesions and blisters. Symptoms from swallowing the water can include headaches, nausea, muscular pains, central abdominal pain, diarrhea and vomiting. Severe cases could include seizures, liver failure, respiratory arrest – even death, although it's rare. The severity of the illness is related to the amount of water ingested, and the concentrations of the toxins.

When there's a toxic algae alert, signs are posted advising people to use caution, and that the swimming beach at the lake is closed. Recreational boating and fishing are still permitted, but the public is advised to avoid activities that could involve accidental ingestion of water. People can still use the public areas for camping, picnics and other outdoor activities.

This year, the Nebraska Department of Environmental Quality (NDEQ) is collecting and analyzing samples at 46 public lakes on a weekly basis throughout the 2010 recreational season. Not every lake in the state is monitored.

Toxic algae and bacteria results are updated every Friday and posted on NDEQ's website, www.deq.state.ne.us. Health alerts be found on NDEQ's website or the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services' website, <http://www.dhhs.ne.gov/newsroom/newsreleases/>.

Play it safe this summer. Enjoy your time spent at the lake. Just be aware of toxic algae alerts.