

TOXIC BLUE-GREEN ALGAE

A THREAT TO IOWA BEACHES AND BEACHGOERS

Blue-green algae blooms are showing up more frequently in Iowa waters.

This poses a serious threat to the health of Iowans and their pets. Algal blooms are overgrowths of algae in the water. Some, such as blue-green algae, can produce dangerous toxins. Harmful algal blooms form in slow-moving, warm water when fed by an overabundance of nutrients (nitrogen and phosphorus).

At this time, the State of Iowa monitors 39 state park beaches for microcystin from Memorial Day to Labor Day, and posts warning signs when the toxin reaches health advisory levels. However, not all public beaches are monitored and few, if any, private beaches are monitored for microcystin.



SPOTTING TOXIC BLUE-GREEN ALGAE

Know how to identify the blooms, the risks, and how to respond.

Visible signs that a lake, beach, or other waterbody is experiencing a potentially harmful blue-green algae bloom include:

- A visible surface scum resembling spilled paint, pea soup, or streaking of green lines on the surface
- Algae ranging in color from bright, iridescent blue to green, red, or brown.
- A foul odor.

When warning signs are posted, you should stay out of the water. Even when visible blooms die down or float away from beaches, harmful microcystin levels can be present in the water.

Not all algae is toxic. Knowing the difference between potentially harmful algal blooms and other types of algae and plants can help protect the health of you and others. Contrasting images can be found at the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency's website:

<https://www.pca.state.mn.us/water/blue-green-algae-and-harmful-algal-blooms>

KNOW THE DANGERS OF BLUE-GREEN ALGAE

Blue-green algae – also known as cyanobacteria – can secrete harmful toxins.

These include the toxin microcystin, that can cause a variety of health problems. Exposure to unsafe levels of microcystin from blue-green algae blooms can come from direct skin contact, ingesting the water, or inhalation.

- Direct exposure can cause breathing problems, an upset stomach, rashes and other allergic reactions and even liver damage.
- Children have higher risks because they are more likely to ingest the water, and they usually play near the shoreline where blooms are often thickest.
- Inhaling water droplets containing microcystin can result in a runny nose, eye irritation, cough, sore throat, chest pain, asthma-like symptoms, or allergic reactions.
- Dogs that swim in or drink contaminated water can suffer serious harm or even death, sometimes in a matter of hours. Avoid letting them eat or roll in scum along the shoreline. Licking their fur to clean themselves can lead to ingestion of toxins.



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RESPOND TO EXPOSURE

If you suspect you, your child, or your pet have been exposed:

- Shower or rinse off with clean water as soon as possible. Thoroughly wash exposed areas.
- It is a good practice to always take a shower or rinse off children or dogs after contact with surface water, even if no warnings or advisories are posted. Many beaches are not monitored and microcystin can linger even if blooms are not visible. Other potentially harmful contaminants, such as bacteria and viruses, may also be present.
- In case of symptoms, seek prompt medical care – or veterinary care for a pet.

HELP REDUCE THREATS

Blue-green algae blooms result from pollution sources including agricultural and urban fertilizers, livestock manure, leaking septic systems, and wastewater treatment facilities.

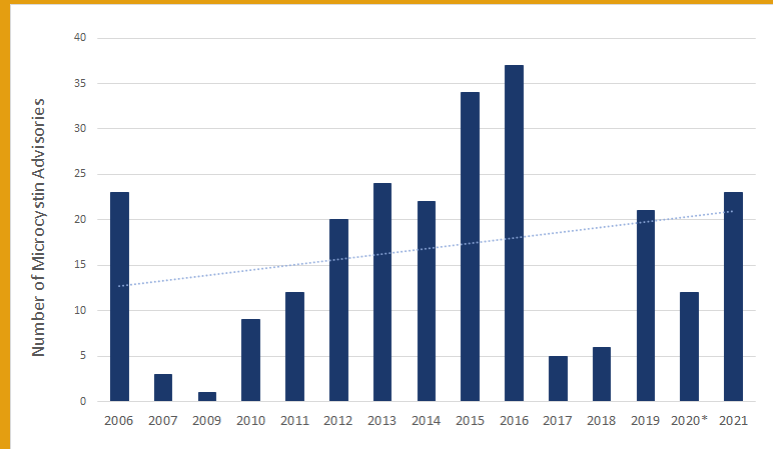
The best way to get rid of these blooms is to reduce pollution. Here are some ways you can help:

- Avoid creating nutrient pollution: Pick up pet waste, maintain your septic system, and be careful not to overfertilize your lawn or fields.
- Let your legislators know you care about water quality and want to see increased action and funding for clean water.
- Learn more about opportunities to make your voice heard at www.iaenvironment.org where you can sign up under “Get Involved.”



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IOWA STATE PARK BEACHES NUMBER OF ADVISORIES



*Since 2020 DNR has been using a more protective 8 microgram/L advisory threshold.



STAY INFORMED

The Iowa Environmental Council provides more information, updates a map of beach advisories, and tracks trends online at:

www.iaenvironment.org/beaches

Information on the Iowa Department of Natural Resources beach monitoring program can be found at www.iowadnr.gov.