

Fact sheet: Blue-green algae and recreation

Blue-green algal bloom in Lake Atkinson, Somerset region.

Blue-green algal blooms: risks to lake users

Blue-green algae (cyanobacteria) poses health risks to people who swim, boat and fish at Seqwater storage lakes.

What is blue-green algae?

Blue-green algae (cyanobacteria) are naturally occurring bacteria that live in lakes and waterways. The presence of sufficient nutrients, warm temperatures and high levels of sunlight, together with calm waters, provide optimal growing conditions for blue-green algae. Excessive growth, called an algal bloom, generally occurs during summer and autumn, however blooms can happen at any time. Cool, cloudy and windy weather can help reduce blue-green algae levels.

Why are blue-green algae a problem?

Blue-green algae impacts water quality, and some species produce toxins that can be harmful to people and animals.

Algae and associated toxins may be present in lakes without being visible to the naked eye. Sometimes algae can be mixed in the water column, or produce a smelly, thick scum on the water surface.

Not all blooms are toxic, but in the interests of public safety, we treat them as toxic until the water has been tested.

Algal blooms are expected to occur every year with varying severity and can persist for weeks, months or even an entire season if the right conditions exist.



Exposure to blue-green algae toxins poses serious health risks.

What are the health impacts of exposure to blue-green algae toxins?

Potential health hazards are related to the way people are exposed to the toxins:

- Swallowing water containing algae toxins may cause gastroenteritis symptoms such as vomiting, diarrhoea, fever and headache. The toxins produced by blue-green algae may also affect the liver, kidneys or brain.
- Inhaling affected water, such as when water-skiing, may cause respiratory problems and flu-like symptoms.
- Skin contact with water, including sensitive areas such as the eyes, ears, mouth and nose, may cause irritation, skin rash, flu-like symptoms, and fever.
- Eating fish and other food caught in algae-affected waters may present a health risk. There have been reports of people becoming sick after eating fish caught in algae-affected lakes.

Children are more susceptible to the effects of toxins.

Boiling algae-affected water will not remove algae toxins or make the water safe to drink.

Seek medical advice if you are concerned about your health.

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How can lake users keep safe during blue-green algal blooms?

To protect visitors from exposure to blue-green algae toxins, some water-based recreation activities are restricted when algal blooms occur.

When blue-green algae levels are high, Seqwater lakes will be closed to primary contact (in-water) activities such as swimming, water-skiing, jet-skiing and tubing.

When blue-green algae levels are extreme, lakes will remain closed for primary contact activities. Seqwater will also issue an advisory notice for secondary contact (on-water) activities such as boating, fishing and paddling, recommending people avoid contact with the water.

While your safety at our water storage lakes is our priority, it is your responsibility. To reduce the risk of exposure, avoid contact with the water until blue-green algae levels return to acceptable limits. Follow the advice of Seqwater employees and signage in affected areas.



What can be done about blue-green algal blooms?

Seqwater is working in partnership with researchers to better understand blue-green algal blooms and their toxins. We are also improving the health of our lakes and catchments by reducing nutrient and sediment input from the surrounding land and improving ecosystem function.

We closely monitor our water storages for algae toxins and restrict access to lakes for some water-based activities when algae and toxin levels are high.

As a community, we can help prevent blue-green algal blooms by limiting the amount of nutrients in the water and promoting ecological health.

Detergents and fertilisers contain a high concentration of nitrogen and phosphorus, so we can all play our part by:

- preventing nutrients from washing into roadside drains that flow into local waterways, e.g. by washing the car on the lawn rather than on the road
- using phosphorus-free detergents
- reducing the use of fertilisers where possible
- helping to rehabilitate waterways
- preventing land erosion, where possible, to stop soil washing into waterways.

For more information

Information about blue-green algae at our lakes and the potential health impacts is available on our website, through social media channels, mobile app, and signage.

If you have further questions, please contact us:

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