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SUBJECT: [Blue-green algae blooms pose risks to people, pets](#)

Health departments around Lake Winnebago give warnings and advice

Fond du Lac, Wis. – This summer’s combination of hot humid weather conditions are providing an ideal environment for blue-green algae. Blooms are being observed on Lake Winnebago and the Department of Natural Resources and health officials in Winnebago, Calumet, and Fond du Lac counties are urging the public to be cautious.

Blue - green algae, more properly known as Cyanobacteria, are different from the normal green algae that are common to most lakes. Lake Winnebago is an ideal incubator for blue-green algae blooms because of its large surface area and nutrient-rich waters.

“Blue-green algae can produce toxins that can make people and animals sick,” states Jeff Phillips, Environmental Health Supervisor of the Winnebago County Health Department. “Illness can occur after swimming, after drinking lake water, or when water droplets containing toxins are inhaled.” According to Phillips, people may experience eye, ear, or skin irritation, as well as vomiting and diarrhea. If exposed to large amounts of toxins, nerve and/or liver problems may develop. Animals, especially dogs, are at greater risk of dying from exposure to blue green algae as they may ingest large amounts of toxin by drinking directly from lakes, rivers or streams or by licking their fur after leaving the water.

During the summer, when conditions are right, blue-green algae form scums or “blooms,” creating thick green or bluish-green slimes and mats. This scum often smells like sewage or manure when it piles up along the shore and begins to decompose. “The worst conditions occur when an algae bloom blows into the shallows and piles up along the shoreline or in harbors and channels,” says Art Techlow, DNR Lake Winnebago System Biologist.

“Some people want to kill blue-green algae with chemicals thinking that will make the problem go away. However, according to the World Health Organization and the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration, treating it with an algaecide can actually release even higher doses of toxins into the water and they can persist for days or weeks even after the water looks safe again,” says Gina LaLiberte, DNR Research Scientist. “When the algae mats are visible people and pets are actually less likely to come into contact with the toxins through avoidance of the mats.”

Not all blue-green algae blooms produce toxins, but since there is no way of knowing by looking at it, it is best to assume toxins are present. Blooms most often look like pea soup, floating mats, or scum layers and have a sewage-like smell.

The Winnebago County Health Department and the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources recommend limiting the chance of exposure for you or your pets by following these simple guidelines:

- Avoid swimming, wading, skiing, or coming into contact with blue-green algae blooms.
- Keep children away from algae blooms. They are more likely to transfer material from their hands to their mouths than adults.
- Talk to your neighbors to make sure they are aware of any potentially threatening conditions.
- Keep pets away from algae contaminated water.

If you or your pet come into contact with water where blue-green algae is present, wash thoroughly with clean water. Contact your health care provider or the Poison Control Center at 1-800-222-1222 if you begin to experience any physical symptoms that could suggest cyanotoxin exposure. Contact a veterinarian if pets become ill.

If you or your pets become sick from exposure to blue-green algae, please report the illness to the Department of Health Services on their web page at <http://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/eh/bluegreenalgae/>. The DHS and DNR may conduct follow-up monitoring in response to illness reports.

The primary nutrient that stimulates these lush blooms is phosphorus which is a commonly used in garden, and agricultural fertilizer. Other sources include manure, eroded soil, municipal waste water, and runoff from agricultural land and urban areas.

“Shoreline residents can reduce the amount of phosphorus that goes into the lake by using lake-friendly, zero-phosphorus fertilizer, planting shoreline buffer zones to prevent direct runoff to the lake, and by keeping burn piles and yard waste away from the shoreline,” says Ted Johnson, DNR Aquatic Biologist. Johnson also cautions that in urban areas, anyone who lives on a street with a curb, gutter, and stormwater drains, essentially has waterfront property. “Pet waste, yard care chemicals, and everything else that makes it to the roadway will flush into the nearest lake or river the next time it rains. Working together, we can make progress on controlling problems like this on the lake we all love,” he said.