

Harmful Algal Blooms

A Fact Sheet from the State of Montana



DEPARTMENT OF
PUBLIC HEALTH &
HUMAN SERVICES



What is a harmful algal bloom (HAB)?

A harmful algal bloom (HAB) is a rapid overgrowth of blue-green algae, also called cyanobacteria. Cyanobacteria are native, tiny plant-like organisms that commonly occur in low densities in Montana's lakes, streams, and reservoirs.

How do I spot a HAB?

HABs can resemble:

- pea soup
- spilled paint
- grass clippings

HABs may appear as a blue-green discoloration along rocks and shorelines.

Cyanobacteria are often confused with green algae since both can produce overgrowths (blooms). Green algae can resemble string, horsehair or moss. Green algae do not produce toxins and are not harmful.



Green Algae

Are HABs toxic?

HABs can release cyanotoxins that pose serious health risks to humans, pets, livestock, and wildlife if exposed. Exposure can occur through ingestion of contaminated water or food, including fish, and through skin contact during recreational activities such as swimming or waterskiing.

HABs do not always release toxins. If toxins are released, they can remain in the water after the algal bloom dissipates. A water sample is the only way to know if toxins are present.

What causes HABs?

HABs occur when water conditions (temperature, sunlight, and nutrient levels) promote a rapid overgrowth of cyanobacteria. This usually occurs in summer and fall in Montana.

Human influences such as excess nutrients from land-based sources and higher water temperatures are contributing to increased frequency and duration.

When in Doubt, Stay Out.

Avoid contact with water if a HAB is suspected.

Report and track suspected HABs at: HAB.mt.gov

What are the symptoms in humans?

Cyanotoxin exposure in humans can cause skin rash, stomach pain, vomiting, diarrhea, headache, coughing, or irritations of eyes, nose or throat. More severe symptoms may include liver damage, seizure and irregular heartbeat.

What are the symptoms in animals?

After swimming in or drinking toxin-contaminated water, animals may experience vomiting, loss of energy, stumbling and falling, and seizures. Cyanotoxins can make animals very sick and may cause death within hours or days.

When In Doubt, Stay Out

Stay out of water that looks discolored, smells bad, or has scum, globs, or mats of algae

Can I treat my water to remove toxins?

Conventional treatment and disinfection methods are not effective in removing or deactivating cyanotoxins. Boiling water does not remove toxins, and instead, breaks the cell wall to release more toxins. Use bottled water or a safe water source if a HAB is suspected.

How likely is it that my drinking water has cyanotoxins?

Water supplied by a Public Water System should be safe for consumption and use. If the water should become unsafe, the water system will issue an alert.

If you source your own water from a lake or reservoir, monitor the waterbody for HABs and contact your local health department if a HAB is suspected. Water sourced from a well is not expected to be at risk from HABs.

Report suspected HABs at: HAB.mt.gov

Track reports of HABs before you head out to the water

Can I recreate on lakes with HABs?

Recreationists can still safely camp and picnic at waters experiencing a HAB. However, you should avoid any direct contact with water. Supervise children and pets so they don't touch or swallow the water.

Are fish safe to eat?

HABs can pose potential health risks to humans through fish consumption. It is advised to avoid fish taken from waters with a known or potential HAB, particularly if the fish appear sickly or sluggish.

What should I do if I come into contact with a HAB?

If you have symptoms:

- Contact your health care provider
- Call Poison Control: 1-800-222-1222

What if my pet or livestock swims in or drinks water with a HAB?

- Contact your veterinarian
- Call the Pet Poison Helpline: 1-855-764-7661



For more information
email: HAB@mt.gov
call: 1-888-849-2938