

# Toxic Algae Blooms Threaten Our Rivers and Lakes, Public Health and Economy

## What Is Toxic Algae?

Most algae are a natural part of an ecosystem and pose no threat to the health of humans or animals. However, across the United States we're seeing more and more outbreaks of toxic algae — specific types of algae and bacteria that are capable of seriously harming humans and animals. The most common toxic algae is cyanobacteria, also known as blue-green algae, though they can be many colors, including blue, green, red or brown.

## What's Causing These Toxic Algae Blooms?

Algae blooms occur when the conditions in a waterbody — such as temperature or nutrient concentration — promote the uncontrolled growth of algae. The bigger the bloom, the more likely that bacteria known as cyanobacteria will form. Cyanobacteria can produce toxins such as microcystin, which attacks the liver and can be extremely dangerous if ingested.

Researchers are quickly trying to learn what causes some algae blooms to be extremely dangerous. We do know that increasing water temperature due to climate change and more nutrient pollution from farm fields, dairies, and roads increase the number of algae blooms, including those that are extremely dangerous to human and animal life.

## Our Health and Local Economies Face Serious Risk

Algae blooms can consist of multiple types of algae and bacteria, each potentially causing different health issues. If ingested, some attack the liver and kidneys while others attack the nervous or digestive systems. Some even have the ability to cause death in as little as 15 minutes! They don't have to be ingested to cause harm though. Swimming or wading in water with algae blooms can irritate the eyes, throat, and skin.

This is not just a threat to public health. Algae blooms in water used for recreating — such as swimming, wading or fishing — can completely shut down local economies. Nearby communities that rely on this economic resource can experience significant financial hardship if a water body is closed due to an algae bloom.

## Recent Toxic Algae Blooms

Here's just a small sample of recent toxic algae blooms in Idaho. Photos courtesy IDEQ.



Brownlee Reservoir. Brian Reese photo.



Dworshak Reservoir. Unknown photographer.



Fernan Lake. Bob Steed photo.



Henrys Lake. Brian Reese photo.

# Protect Yourself and Your Pets We Must Take This Seriously

## Protect Yourself and Your Animals

You can't tell whether an algae bloom is toxic just by looking at it. It takes a specialized lab with microscopes to determine whether an algae bloom is toxic or not. So practice these tips to help protect you, your family and your animals.

Before visiting your favorite river or lake, check first for algae blooms using the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality's harmful algae bloom webpage (at right). DEQ updates this webpage frequently so checking this page is a great start to a trip. It doesn't guarantee your safety however, since there is still a chance they could have missed something or not had a chance to report a new bloom,

When out recreating, never drink untreated surface water — even if you don't see an algae bloom nearby. If you are in contact with water and begin to feel irritation in your eyes, throat or nose, get out of the water and get to a doctor as soon as you can.

## We Must Take This Issue Seriously

Toxic algae are likely to plague our state's waters well into the foreseeable future. The good news is that you can help clean up our rivers and lakes and protect human and animal health. DEQ has a limited number of staff working on this issue, which means they can't be checking every water body all the time. So if you're out visiting your favorite river or lake and you see what looks like an algae bloom, call DEQ and let them know. Even better, if you have a smart phone, download the bloomWatch app, which allows you to take pictures that are automatically sent to DEQ.

In addition to being on the lookout for blooms, you can also help show your support for DEQ and the work they're doing to monitor and sample these blooms. Be sure to call your state representatives and let them know how much you love recreating in Idaho's rivers and lakes, and why you want to see DEQ get the funding they need to do this job right. It's up to all of us to protect each other from these toxic algae blooms.



Lake Lowell. Graham Freeman photo.



Thorn Creek. Graham Freeman photo.

## DEQ's Recreation Water Quality Health Advisories:

<http://www.deq.idaho.gov/water-quality/surface-water/recreation-health-advisories/>

## For more information:

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