

# TO YOUR *Pet's* Health

## WHAT ARE THE RISKS OF HABs?

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Have you ever heard the terms blue-green algae or harmful algal blooms and wondered... what is that? Is it something I should be concerned about? Is it something that could harm my pet? The short answer is "yes," this is something your pet needs to avoid.

The name blue-green algae is a bit of a misnomer, as it is a type of bacteria called cyanobacteria. "Algae" is a historical but non-scientific term for a group of microscopic organisms that live in the water in colonies and use photosynthesis as an energy source. Blue-green algae in small quantities are a normal part of a healthy ecosystem. When they go through a "bloom," or rapid and significant growth in numbers and become stressed or die-off, they can become toxic. This is called a harmful algal bloom (HAB).

These blooms usually happen in the latter part of summer when the weather and the water temperatures are warm. It usually happens in shallow areas of lakes or ponds, where the water is still and there is not a lot of wind. Usually there has been an event where the right nutrients (phosphorus and nitrogen) have been rapidly introduced to the body of water, feeding the cyanobacteria and causing their numbers to increase rapidly.

Some visual signs of a "bloom" in a body of water can look like scum, foam, a floating mat, grass clippings or like a paint spill. The colors can range from blue, bright green, blue-green, to even red or brown. Often an odor is noticed such as one associated with sewage or septic systems, dead fish or fishy, earthy, musty, bunker oil or transformer

oil. It will never smell like paint, however.

Some of the toxins produced by cyanobacteria are toxic to the skin, the nervous system, or the liver. Depending on which type of toxin is produced different symptoms may be observed. These can include skin irritation, dizziness, weakness, difficulty breathing, diarrhea and even sudden death. It can be difficult sometimes to diagnose what is going on, unless an exposure to the blue-green algae is known. Treatment is not specific or guaranteed to work. In most cases it involves detoxification, which may include inducing vomiting if it has been ingested and bathing the organism off the skin and hair coat to prevent further ingestion. This is then followed by supportive care.

The Kansas Department of Health and Environment has a link on their website [www.kdheks.gov/algae-illness](http://www.kdheks.gov/algae-illness). This is a great informational source on blue-green algae and HABs. It talks about testing and reporting of the presence of blue-green algae. It also has a list of the current advisories on the state lakes that may be affected.

What does this mean for you and your pet? If you notice any kind of algal bloom in a body of water, avoidance is the best course of action. Not all algal blooms are toxic, but it is better to be safe than sorry. If the affected body of water is near where you live and is used for recreation or your pet is going to come in daily contact with it, testing of the water is a good idea. Enjoy the rest of the summer, but remember to be on the lookout for blue-green algae and HABs.



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