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Blue Green Algae Advisory

The Northwestern Health Unit wishes to advise all people using lakes and rivers in the area to be on the lookout for blue-green algal blooms which can occur in any body of water if the right conditions exist during the spring, summer, and fall seasons. Blue-green algae thrive where water is shallow, slow moving and warm, but they may also be present in deeper, cooler water. Nutrients, such as phosphorus and nitrogen, increase the growth of blue-green algae which may even appear as yellowish brown, red or purple blooms.

Dense blue-green algal blooms may cover the water with a fluorescent paint-like scum. They may also turn the water into a blue or green colour that resembles pea soup. Large blooms can form floating clumps with fresh blooms giving off an odour of newly mown grass and older blooms the odour of rotting garbage.

Visible algal blooms may produce toxins. These toxins can irritate the skin and, if ingested, can cause diarrhea and vomiting. At high enough levels, toxins may cause liver and nervous system damage and even death. The highest concentrations of toxins are usually found in blooms and scum on the shoreline. These dense accumulations pose the greatest potential risks to people and pets.

If blooms are visible:

- Avoid using the water for drinking, bathing, or showering, and do not allow children, pets, or livestock to drink or swim in the water.
- Do not boil the water because boiling the water may release more toxins into the water.
- Avoid cooking with the water because food may absorb toxins from the water during cooking.
- Do not treat the water with a disinfectant such as bleach as this may break open algae cells and release more toxins into the water.
- Lakeshore residents with shallow drinking water intake pipes that might pump in blue-green algae should be cautious. On lakes and rivers where blue-green algal blooms are confirmed, people who use the surface water for their private drinking water supply may wish to consider an alternate, protected source of water particularly because home water filtration systems do not protect against the toxins.
- Exercise caution with respect to eating fish caught in water where high concentrations of blue-green algae are visible and do not eat the liver, kidneys, and other organs of fish caught in the water.

For more information, please call a Public Health Inspector at your local Northwestern Health Unit office.

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