

 West Lothian Council	Environmental Health		SUBJECT: Blue-Green Algae
		Food Safety/Food Hygiene	NUMBER: PH11
REVISED: 18/11/09		Health & Safety	
	✓	Public Health	KEYWORDS: ALGAE
STATUS: PUBLIC ADVICE		Pollution Control	
		Pest Control/Dog Warden	

Information Sheet PH11 Blue-Green Algae

What are blue-green algae?

Blue-green algae are tiny organisms which occur naturally in lochs, ponds, reservoirs, rivers and in the sea. Blue-green algae commonly occur during periods of prolonged hot weather but sometimes occur at other times of the year. Waters which have been polluted by agricultural, domestic or industrial discharges are prone to developing blue-green algae.

In still waters the algae can multiply to such an extent that they discolour the water which then appears green, blue green, greenish brown or dark brown. Sometimes a scum may form on the surface. This scum can appear in different places at different times, but is most commonly found at the water's edge or shore line.

How do blue-green algae affect humans and animals?

Some, but not all the blue-green algae release toxins into the water. It is not possible to tell which algae do or do not produce toxins simply by their appearance. Laboratory analysis is needed for this. Therefore, it is advisable to regard all algal scums as toxic.

The toxins of blue-green algae can cause deaths of animals which come into contact with algae, either through drinking contaminated water or swallowing quantities of the scum.

Dogs have died after going into the water at the shores of affected lochs.

Canoeists, wind surfers and swimmers who have either swum through algal scum or swallowed it have suffered from skin rashes, eye irritation, vomiting, diarrhoea and pains in muscles and joints. There have been no reports of long-term illness or death in human beings following exposure to blue-green algae in recreational waters in the UK. However, illnesses are sometimes severe.

Drinking water supplies are monitored to prevent any harmful effects on health from blue-green algae.

What should I do about blue-green algae?

Avoid all contact with the affected waters and ensure that children and pets are kept away.

Farmers should ensure that their animals do not have access to contaminated water. This may require fencing around suspect waters.

If any member of the public finds areas of water affected with blue-green algae they should inform their local Environmental Health & Trading Standards Department at West Lothian Council. Environmental Health may then take action to ensure that notices are posted around the affected water to let local residents, visitors or patrons know what the position is.

What about eating fish from affected waters?

Blue-green algae and their toxins can adversely affect fish growth and health and, in some circumstances, can cause fish kills.

It is currently thought that eating fish from waters affected by blue-green algae is acceptable, provided that the fish show no behavioral abnormalities and there are no dead fish in the water body concerned. The fish should be thoroughly gutted and well washed before eating. You should not feed the liver, other offal, or gut from fish caught in waters affected with blue-green algae to pets.

If you would like any further advice about blue-green algae in your area, please do not hesitate to contact West Lothian Council's Environmental Health & Trading Standards Department on 01506 282500 or E-mail at: environmentalhealth@westlothian.gov.uk.