

# Harmful Algal Blooms in New Mexico



Harmful algal blooms (HABs) are caused by algae and cyanobacteria, or blue-green algae. HABs are found in New Mexico lakes, streams, rivers, ponds, and other surface waters when water is warm, slow-moving, and full of nutrients such as nitrogen or phosphorous. Blooms grow fast and can look like foam, scum, or paint on the water's surface that is green, blue, brown, or red in color. While some blooms are easily detected, others are not because they grow near the bottom of a body of water.



## Blue-Green Algae and Human Health

Blue-green algae, or cyanobacteria, can quickly grow out of control producing cyanotoxins that can make people sick. Exposure to cyanotoxins may occur when:

- Swallowing contaminated water
- Breathing in toxins from the blooms
- Eating fish or shellfish that contain toxins
- Swimming in contaminated water

People may experience irritation to the skin, eyes, nose, throat, and lungs when exposed to cyanotoxins through touching or swimming in contaminated water or breathing in droplets of contaminated air. Small children are more likely to be affected by harmful algal blooms due to their small body size and the increased time they spend in the water. Exposure to cyanotoxins can occur by eating contaminated food or by swallowing contaminated water. Symptoms of stomach pain, headache, muscle weakness, dizziness, vomiting, diarrhea, and liver damage can occur depending on the cyanotoxin involved. There are steps that you can take to address these symptoms:

- Talk to your healthcare provider if you need advice on how to relieve your symptoms and mention that you may have come in contact with cyanobacteria or its toxins.
- Call the poison control center at 1-800-222-1222 and they may be able to provide information on illnesses caused by cyanobacteria.

## What You Can Do

- Follow guidance on posted signs such as swimming advisories at area lakes and rivers.
- Stay out of bodies of water if you see scum or color changes in the water's surface.
- Stay out of the water if it smells bad, looks discolored, has scum or paint-like streaks on the surface, or has dead fish.



### Helpful Resources:

<https://www.niehs.nih.gov/health/topics/agents/algal-blooms>;  
<https://www.cdc.gov/habs/index.html>; <https://nmtracking.doh.nm.gov>

