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Being Safe in the Water with Algae Blooms

Harmful algae blooms are getting more and more common with the increased temperatures and the length of the summers here in the Pacific Northwest. Cyanobacteria are a group of bacteria that are found in fresh and marine water and utilize photosynthesis to proliferate. The blooms are visible on the surface of the water and appear as bright green, bluish-green, white or reddish-brown scum, streaks or cloudy patches. They may look like paint or pea soup on the surface of the water. Low water flow, warm temperatures and agricultural run-off may contribute to an algae bloom.

The bacteria produce toxins as part of their metabolic processes and these toxins are harmful to people and animals, particularly dogs. The toxins target the kidneys and liver. Contact may be through skin contact, inhalation or ingestion. Symptoms may include skin rashes, respiratory disease or GI upset (vomiting and diarrhea). Between 2008 and 2016, there were 10 reported cases (to the OR Health Authority and half were fatal.

Symptoms may develop rapidly with some toxin and takes minutes to hours with others. There are no specific treatments beyond supportive care but any animal that is potentially exposed should be taken to a veterinarian urgently as fluid are necessary to support the kidneys in the face of the toxin and decontamination of the gut may also be needed. Bathing should also be performed to remove any toxin from the skin or coat.

More information can be found at www.healthoregon.org/hab

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