
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 are mostly seen during periods of long hot weather in waters which have been polluted by agricultural, domestic or industrial discharges.

In still waters the algae, can multiply during the summer months and discolour the water. These 'blooms' appear green, blue green or greenish brown and can form a scum on the surface. The scum can appear at different places at different times, but is most commonly found at the waters edge or shore line.

Can it affect humans and animals?

Yes. Some, but not all, blue green algae release toxins (poisonous chemicals) into the water. It is not possible to tell which algae do or do not produce toxins without close examination in a laboratory. It is advisable to look upon all algal scum as being a possible danger to health.

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

Human illness, including skin rashes, eye irritation, vomiting, diarrhoea, and pains in muscles and joints have occurred in some uses of recreational waters (eg canoeing, wind surfing and swimming) where water with algal scum had been swallowed or swam through. There have been no reports of long term illness or deaths in humans - however the illnesses were sometimes severe.

Deaths of dogs and livestock have been put down to blue green algae when they appear to have only entered the water and the shores of lochs, which were affected with algal scum.

What if I see some?

Persons who find blue green algae in water should avoid all contact and ensure in particular that children and pets are kept away. In the case of farm animals, farmers should ensure that their animals do not have access to contaminated water. This may require fencing around suspected waters. If any member of the public finds areas of water affected with blue green algae they should inform the local Environmental Health Department. They in turn may decide to post notices or notify local residents and farmers of the changes.

How is it controlled?

Many investigations are underway to find out why blue green algae multiply and what factors affect this multiplication. Monitoring of drinking water supplies is undertaken by Scottish Water. The Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA) will also organise samples to be analysed. Research is underway to find a substance, which will kill algae without causing any negative effects on the environment.

Need further advice or information?

- ❖ NHS Inform www.nhsinform.co.uk
- ❖ NHS24 ☎ 111 www.nhs24.co.uk
- ❖ www.nhsborders.scot.nhs.uk
- ❖ Local health clinic or GP

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