



Cayuga County Health and Human Services
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Cayuga County Health Department Identifies Presence of Blue-Green Algae

During the last week in September, many residents called the Cayuga County Health Department with concerns about algae on both the east and west sides of the northern portion of Owasco Lake and along the outlet. Reportedly the algae had accumulated at the surface of the water, casting a very green color that had a paint-like appearance. The Cayuga County Health Department sent in samples of the algae to the New York State Department of Health (NYSDOH) for identification.

The NYSDOH has identified the algae as blue-green algae. This is of concern because blue-green algae produce toxins that could pose a health risk to people and animals when they are exposed to them in large enough quantities. Health effects could occur when the blooms are swallowed while swimming or through contact with the skin.

Consuming water containing high levels of blue-green algae has been associated with effects on the liver and on the nervous system in laboratory animals, pets, livestock, and people. Direct contact or breathing airborne droplets containing high levels of blue-green algal toxins during swimming or showering can cause irritation of the skin, eyes, nose and throat and inflammation in the respiratory tract.

This is the first time that blue-green algae has been definitively identified in Owasco Lake. Due to colder water temperatures, it is unlikely that the blooms will occur again this year. Should a blue-green algae bloom occur next year, the Cayuga County Health Department has the following advice:

1. Homeowners who draw water directly from Owasco Lake, or any surface water, for household use should never drink the untreated surface water, whether or not algae blooms are present. Untreated surface water may contain bacteria, viruses, or parasites that all could cause illness. Consuming water with high levels of algae can cause additional health problems. In-home treatment units do not protect people from blue-green algal toxins.
2. Do not let your pet drink water experiencing blue-green algae blooms.
3. People and pets should not swim in surface water that is discolored with blue-green algae. If contact does occur, wash with soap and water or rinse thoroughly with clean water to remove algae.
4. Avoid bathing, showering, or washing dishes in untreated surface water that is experiencing an algae bloom.
5. Boiling water does not remove blue-green algal toxins.
6. People should suspect that blue-green algae could be present in surface water that is visibly discolored or that has surface scums. Swimming, bathing or showering with water not visibly affected by a blue-green algae bloom is not expected to cause health effects.

Drinking water treated by the City of Auburn and the Town of Owasco is not a concern as their treatment processes remove the algae and their toxin from the water. While the City of Auburn and the Town of Owasco are not required by the NYSDOH to monitor their public water supply for algae concentrations, they do use treatment techniques that would remove algae and their toxins if they were present.

Individuals with questions may call the Environmental Health Division of the Cayuga County Health Department at 315-253-1405 or log onto the Cayuga County Health Department website <http://co.cayuga.ny.us/hhs/doh> or <http://www.nyhealth.gov/environmental/water/drinking/bluegreenalgae.pdf> for information.