

ONEIDA COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENT

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Health Department Urges People to Exercise Caution if Blue-Green Algae Appears to be Present in Swimming Areas

Blue-green algae, technically known as cyanobacteria, are microscopic organisms that are naturally present in lakes and streams. They usually are present in low numbers. Blue-green algae can become very abundant in warm, shallow, undisturbed surface water that receives a lot of sunlight. When this occurs, they can form blooms that discolor the water or produce floating rafts or scums on the surface of the water. Bathing beaches regulated by local health departments are periodically closed due to the occurrence of blue-green algae blooms. In addition to the possible presence of harmful toxins, reduced visibility in the water caused by algae blooms could create a drowning hazard. The Oneida County Health Department advises the community to adhere to beach closure advisories resulting from blue-green algae blooms.

Some blue-green algae produce harmful 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 surface scums or water containing high levels of blue-green algal toxins are swallowed, through contact with the skin, or when airborne droplets containing toxins are inhaled while swimming, bathing, or showering.

Harmful toxins can cause a variety of acute symptoms and signs including skin or eye irritation, gastrointestinal upset (vomiting & diarrhea), liver damage, and neurological symptoms. People can come into contact with harmful toxins through recreational water activities, drinking untreated surface water, and consuming contaminated freshwater fish or shellfish. The Oneida County Health Department recommends contacting your health care provider if symptoms following exposure to blue-green algae occur.

For more information see: <http://www.health.ny.gov/environmental/water/drinking/bluegreenalgae.htm>

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