

DATE:	July 31, 2025
TO:	Health Alert Network
FROM:	Debra L. Bogen, MD, FAAP, Secretary of Health
SUBJECT:	Harmful Algal Bloom Exposures in Recreational Waterbodies in Pennsylvania
DISTRIBUTION:	Statewide
LOCATION:	Statewide
STREET ADDRESS:	n/a
COUNTY:	n/a
MUNICIPALITY:	n/a
ZIP CODE:	n/a

This transmission is a “Health Advisory” and provides important information for a specific incident or situation; may not require immediate action.

HOSPITALS: PLEASE SHARE WITH ALL MEDICAL, PEDIATRIC, INFECTION CONTROL, NURSING AND LABORATORY STAFF IN YOUR HOSPITAL

EMS COUNCILS: PLEASE DISTRIBUTE AS APPROPRIATE

FQHCs: PLEASE DISTRIBUTE AS APPROPRIATE

LOCAL HEALTH JURISDICTIONS: PLEASE DISTRIBUTE AS APPROPRIATE

PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS: PLEASE DISTRIBUTE TO YOUR MEMBERSHIP

Summary

- Harmful algal blooms (HABs) can occur throughout Pennsylvania’s waterbodies, particularly during warmer months.
- Exposure to HABs can cause sickness in animals and humans.
- Members of the public should follow waterbody advisories or closures and stay out of water that is discolored, smells bad, or has the presence of visible foam, algal mats, or a paint-like appearance.
- Healthcare providers should assess for potential HAB exposures when caring for patients exhibiting compatible symptoms following recreational water activities.
- To report a suspected HAB in a waterbody, or for additional inquiries about HABs in a waterbody complete the suspected HAB reporting form at <https://bit.ly/4cq4gtZ> or contact HABs@pa.gov.
- Report potential HAB exposures or illnesses to dehe@pa.gov.
- If you would like to test for HAB-associated illnesses, samples must be collected within 48 hours of symptom onset. Please contact the PA Department of Health immediately at dehe@pa.gov or at 877-PA-HEALTH (877-724-3258) to initiate testing.
- If you have any questions, please contact your local health department or the PA Department of Health immediately at dehe@pa.gov or at 877-PA-HEALTH (877-724-3258).

Overview

Exposure to harmful algal blooms (HABs) can cause sickness in humans and animals. HABs can occur in waterbodies throughout the state, and they are most prevalent during warmer months (June through September). To minimize the risk of exposure and sickness, we

recommend the public follow all waterbody advisories or closures and avoid water that is discolored, has a foul odor, or has visible foam scum, or mats.

Background

Harmful algal blooms (HABs) happen when naturally occurring cyanobacteria (also known as blue-green algae) in lakes, streams, and other waterbodies grow out of control, or “bloom.” HABs can occur in freshwater, brackish, and marine waterbodies and produce toxins including microcystins, nodularins, cylindrospermopsins, anatoxin-a, and saxitoxins. The typical season for HABs in Pennsylvania is June through September, although HABs can occur during other times of the year under certain conditions, including in calm, slow-moving water and in nutrient-rich water.

Exposure to HABs can make humans and animals sick. People can be exposed to HABs through direct skin contact during water activities such as swimming or wading; by drinking contaminated water; eating contaminated blue-green algae supplements, fish, or shellfish; or by breathing in small droplets in the air containing toxins. Symptoms of HAB-associated illness depend on the route and duration of exposure, the type and amount of toxin present, and the presence of existing comorbidities. However, many HAB-associated illnesses will occur within less than 15 minutes to 48 hours after exposure. People exposed to cyanobacteria or their toxins can experience headache; irritation of the skin, eyes, nose, throat, and/or lungs; gastrointestinal symptoms such as diarrhea, stomach pain, and/or vomiting; and/or neurological symptoms such as drowsiness, speech disturbances, and/or numbness or tingling. Treatment for exposure consists of symptom-directed and supportive care. Symptoms typically self-resolve within 72, although oral exposures may require elevated and prolonged care due to risk of cardiac arrest, coma, liver damage, and respiratory arrest.

There are no clinical diagnostic tests for cyanobacteria or their toxins. However, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) can test for the presence of certain cyanotoxins or their metabolites in urine or serum samples. If HAB-associated illness is suspected, urine and serum samples must be collected within 48 hours of symptom onset to be tested. To report a suspected HAB-associated illness and determine if testing may be appropriate, please contact dehe@pa.gov or 877-PA-HEALTH immediately.

Recommendations

For the public:

- Stay out of water with an algal bloom. Do not swim, fish, boat, or play in areas where the water is discolored, smells bad, has the presence of foam, scum, algal mats, or paint-like appearance on the surface, or has dead fish or other animals present.
- Keep animals away from water that may have algal blooms and consult with a veterinarian if a pet or livestock becomes ill after contact with water that looked or smelled odd.
- Seek and follow all waterbody and beach advisories or closures.
- Wash your hands after contact with water from ponds, lakes, or streams.
- Shower after participating in waterbody activities.
- Do not drink water from ponds, lakes, or streams.
- Consult with a health care provider before taking supplements containing blue-green algae (including spirulina and chlorella).

- Consult with a health care provider if you suspect that you might be ill from exposure to HAB cyanotoxins.
- To report a suspected HAB in a waterbody, or for additional questions about HABs in a waterbody, complete the suspected HAB reporting form at <https://bit.ly/4cq4qtZ> or contact HABs@pa.gov.

For health care providers:

- When caring for a patient with potential HAB-associated illness, identify symptoms and assess potential exposures, including swimming, wading, or fishing; consuming contaminated blue-green algae supplements, fish, or shellfish; and/or travel to areas where “red tides” (HABs caused by *Karenia brevis*) may occur.
- Review the Clinician Toolbox for [Cyanobacterial Blooms and Associated Illnesses](https://www.astho.org/Cyanobacterial-Blooms-and-Associated-Illnesses) ([astho.org](https://www.astho.org)).
- To report a suspected HAB-associated illness and determine if testing may be appropriate, please contact dehe@pa.gov or 877-PA-HEALTH immediately. For additional assistance on the management of HAB-associated illness, contact Poison Control at 1-800-222-1222.

Additional resources on harmful algal blooms:

- CDC | [Physician Reference for Cyanobacterial Blooms](#)
- CDC | [Veterinarian Reference for Cyanobacterial Blooms](#)
- PA DOH | [HABs \(pa.gov\)](#)
 - [HABs Fact Sheet for Health Care Providers](#)
 - [HABs Fact Sheet for Veterinarians](#)
 - [Harmful Algal Blooms \(HABs\) Factsheet for Health Care Providers](#)
 - [HABs Frequently Asked Questions](#)
 - [HABs Training Summary Document](#)
- PA-DOH | [Harmful Algal Blooms \(HABs\) in Pennsylvania - TRAIN PA - an affiliate of the TRAIN Learning Network powered by the Public Health Foundation](#) (Creating a free account is required)
- PA DOH | [HABs Dashboard \(pa.gov\)](#)

For questions, please call your local health department or DOH at 877-PA-HEALTH (877-724-3258).

Individuals interested in receiving future PA-HANs can register at <https://ondemand.mir3.com/han-pa-gov/login/>.

Categories of Health Alert messages:

Health Alert: conveys the highest level of importance; warrants immediate action or attention.

Health Advisory: provides important information for a specific incident or situation; may not require immediate action.

Health Update: provides updated information regarding an incident or situation; unlikely to require immediate action.

This information is current as of July 31, 2025, but may be modified in the future.