

Staying safe in our waterways

Toxic Algae in the Wellington region

There are lots of different types of algae that can grow in the waterways in our region. It's important to know which algae can be harmful to people and dogs, so that we can enjoy our waterways safely during summer.

Freshwater toxic algae (cyanobacteria) are naturally present in all New Zealand waterways. Usually, toxic algae forms dense blooms when the weather is dry and warm. Algal blooms can be dangerous to aquatic life in our rivers and streams by blocking sunlight and smothering the riverbed.

The bloom will usually last until there is a 'flushing event'. Flushing events happen after heavy rain, washing the algae away. Once the algae reaches the sea, it is no longer harmful as the salt water de-activates the toxins which affect humans and dogs.

Who is affected?

Anyone who uses waterways in our region can be affected by toxic algae.

Swimmers and recreational water users: Swallowing water containing toxic algae can make people sick, and contact can cause irritation of the skin, eyes, nose and mouth.

Children: Because children are inquisitive, they are more likely to pick up/touch toxic algae and then put fingers in mouths so special care should be taken when swimming with them.

Dogs: Dogs are most at risk as they like the smell and taste of toxic algae. A small amount, the size of a 50 cent piece, can be enough to kill a dog. Dogs are most susceptible when mats wash up along river edges.

Using the waterways safely

In Wellington, we are avid users of our waterways, making the most of their recreational opportunities during summer. It is important to do this safely, especially if you have a dog or child.

The best things you can do to protect yourself, your family and your pets is to know what to look for and check for alerts before you go.



River algae



Lake algae (Science Media Centre)

Know what toxic algae looks like

In rivers:

- Look for black, green, brown slime on rocks, or brown or black 'mats' at the river's edge that have a velvety texture and earthy/musty smell.
- If you see them, be cautious and avoid that river site, particularly if you have a dog.
- Check for warning signs before getting in the water or allowing your dog near it.

In lakes: Lakes in the Wellington region are not part of our monitoring program, as river swimming spots are much more popular. However, we encourage you to know what to look for in lakes as well as rivers.

- If the water has a 'pea soup appearance', it could contain toxic algae. Cloudy water with small green blobs suspended in it should be avoided.
- Only high-risk lakes in our region are routinely monitored for cyanobacteria blooms. However, warning signs may be put in place when an issue is detected.

Check for alerts

You can check for any known issues in the waterways in our region by visiting the **Can I swim here** page on the Land Air Water Aotearoa (LAWA) website.

Keeping your dog safe

Check for alerts before you go to a river, look for warning signs, and keep an eye on your dog when you're there.

If there has been an alert issued, or you think you have spotted a toxic algal bloom:

- Keep your dog on a lead
- Keep your dog out of the water
- Ensure it does not eat any algal mats.

Know the signs of poisoning in dogs

If you suspect that your dog has eaten toxic algae, contact your vet **immediately**. In extreme cases, death can occur within 30 minutes after the first signs of illness appear.

Signs a dog has been poisoned by toxic algae include lethargy, muscle tremors, fast breathing, twitching, paralysis and convulsions.

Tell your vet if you suspect your dog has eaten toxic algae, this will ensure that it can be given the best treatment as quickly as possible.

What is being done?

There is no quick or obvious solution to prevent toxic algal blooms, but improving water quality is most likely to help mitigate them.

Greater Wellington works with other councils and Regional Public Health to monitor the safety of our waterways, and issue warnings when blooms occur.

This includes signs at key sites where toxic algae occurs, and updates online. However, people are advised to learn what toxic algae looks like, and swim elsewhere if they see it.



Further Information

For more information on toxic algae, and where it is safe to swim, head to:

<https://www.gw.govt.nz/toxic-algae-faqs/>
www.lawa.org.nz/explore-data/swimming/

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