

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.

Toxic algae (cyanobacteria) are naturally present in all New Zealand waterways. For most of the year, it occurs at very low levels and is not a problem. When we have long spells of warm, stable weather it can grow to high levels (or 'bloom'). Toxic algae can be highly poisonous, and if ingested, cause serious illness or even death.

Toxic algae is scoured off the rocks in the riverbed and washed away by a 'flushing event' – which occurs as a result of heavy rainfall. Once the algae reaches the sea, it's no longer harmful as the salt water de-activates the toxins which affect humans and dogs.

Who is affected?

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

Swimmers and recreational water users:

Swallowing water containing toxic algae can make you sick. Contact can cause irritation in your eyes, nose, and mouth.

Children: Because children are inquisitive, they're more likely to pick up/touch toxic algae then put their fingers in their mouth. 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 piece the size of a 50-cent coin can be enough to kill a dog. Dogs are most susceptible when mats wash up along river edges.

Using the waterways safely

Us Wellingtonians are avid users of our waterways during summer. It's important to do this safely, especially if you have a dog or kids.

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.



Know what toxic algae looks like

In rivers:

Look for:

- black, green, brown slime on rocks.
- greeny/brown 'detached mats' at the river's edge – these can often be caught up with other river debris and have a strong 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. 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.

Check for alerts

You can check for any known issues in the waterways in our region by visiting lawa.org.nz/swim



Floating detached toxic algae mats

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 reduce them.

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

Look for toxic algae signage at popular swimming spots, and updates online. Learn what toxic algae looks like and swim elsewhere if you see it.

Further Information

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

www.gw.govt.nz/freshwater-toxic-algae/
www.lawa.org.nz/swim

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