

TOXIC ALGAE

What you should know

What is toxic algae?

Toxic algae (also known as cyanobacteria) are naturally present in many New Zealand waterways. Toxic algae are commonly found in 'clean' rivers and less likely to be present in high nutrient load waters where filamentous algae grow. The growth of toxic algae is encouraged when river flows are stable, and temperatures are warm.

What do the mats look like?

Toxic algal mats are actually dark brown or black and grow attached to rocks on the river bed. Mats that come loose from the river bed can wash up on the river bank or form floating 'rafts' in shallow areas. Where exposed, the mats may dry out and turn a light brown colour. They also have a strong musty odour, which may attract dogs to eat them.



Dark brown toxic algal mat

Harmless algae that you may see in rivers



What is the problem with toxic algae?

Toxic algae can produce toxins that are harmful to humans, dogs, livestock and wildlife when ingested.

What are the possible health effects?

Swallowing water containing toxic algae can lead to vomiting, diarrhea, abdominal pain, cramps, nausea and other effects in humans. Skin contact can cause irritation of the skin, eyes, nose and mouth. Exposure to high levels of toxins can result in serious illness or death. Dogs are particularly susceptible to poisoning from toxic algae as they love to scavenge and play near water.

What should I do if I find toxic algae?

1. Avoid contact

Rivers users, particularly those with dogs, or those taking water for livestock or human consumption, should avoid contact with any thick dark brown-black algal mats particularly those that are easily accessible, exposed on river edges or floating in shallow areas of riverbanks or near rocks.

2. Avoid swimming or drinking the water

If toxic algal mats are widespread in a river you should presume that the water may be unsafe for bathing or drinking.

Who should I call if I experience a reaction?

If you think you are experiencing a serious reaction, seek urgent medical attention. Advise your doctor of your potential exposure to toxic algae. Your GP has been asked to notify Public Health of any people with possible reactions.

Who should I call if I think my animal is sick?

If you are concerned about your animal(s), contact a vet immediately (the toxins can affect animals within minutes). You or your vet can report any animal illness resulting from contact with toxic algae to your local council.

What are local councils doing about it?

Nelson City Council will put up 'No Swimming' signs at key sites along the Maitai River when toxic algae levels are high.

Tasman District Council has information signage at popular swimming holes, however people are advised to learn what toxic algae looks like and swim elsewhere if they see it.

Meantime, research is underway by Cawthron scientists and students to find out the key reasons for toxic algal blooms and provide recommendations on how to manage and predict where nuisance blooms may occur. This research will be useful for management of all rivers.

More information

If you see toxic algal mats, please contact Nelson City Council, phone 546 0200, or Tasman District Council, phone 543 8400. For more info, visit nelson.govt.nz or tasman.govt.nz, search = toxic algae.



Toxic algal mats forming a floating 'raft' on the water's surface