

LGAE IN LAKE SPOKANE

Galen Buterbaugh, Lake Spokane Association Technical Advisor

Blue-green algae growth in Lake Spokane appears to be particularly early this year. The unusual spring weather may have contributed to the problem. About the middle of July blue-green algae, which is actually a bacteria, began to appear in the water column. This is not unusual as it occurs every year, generally later in August or September. Blue-green algae has the unusual ability to control its depth in the water column and moves up and down to absorb sunlight. When it is suspended in the water column it looks like very small greyish round blobs barely large enough to see with the naked eye. When it floats on the surface it is called a bloom or surface scum. It also can produce a toxin harmful to humans and animals.

It is important to put the presence of this toxin in some kind of perspective. Blue-green algae is found world wide, is very common, and does not always produce toxin. Also there is no known case in North America where a human has died from exposure to this toxin but animal deaths are documented. In fact the first documented case of dogs dying from blue-green algae toxin exposure in the state of Washington came from Lake Spokane almost 45 years ago. Most animals die from drinking water covered with the surface scum not from just exposure to the skin. At the present time many lake in Washington are experiencing blue-green algae blooms. Every year we have blue-green algae growth in Lake Spokane but blooms do not always appear. In fact in the last two years we have not had a widespread surface bloom. If you see patches of smooth floating green or white algae that looks like paint along the shore or in the lake you would be wise to avoid prolong exposure and do not allow your pets to drink from these patches.

We also have another type of floating algae in Lake Spokane that is more common than the blue-green algae and does not produce any toxin. It is called filamentous algae and has a rough uneven surface containing air bubbles and is usually light green or yellow in color. If you take a stick and dip it in a blue green algae patch it will just dissolve into very small particles. When you dip it in filamentous algae it stays on the stick in long slimy strands.

As water temperatures drop and daylight decreases this algae should gradually dissolve and disappear. I have seen it in the lake as late as November. Rain and wind also will aid in this process. In the last stages of its life cycle blue green algae may form windrows along the windy shore that look like green and white paint floating on the surface. This can occur at any time in the year. It also may have a very earthy, musky smell that can be quite strong.



