

Column Name- The Heartland Minute

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*“Blue Green Algae”*

Reports of harmful blue-green algae in Kansas waterways have been coming in unusually early this year. This is possibly a result of warmer late-spring weather and more rain events. Blue-green algae are not algae at all, but rather a type of bacteria called cyanobacteria. The bacteria thrive in warm, nutrient-rich water and, under the right conditions, can form blooms, called harmful algal blooms (HAB).

Certain varieties of blue-green algae can produce toxins that are linked to illness in humans and animals. There are already several advisories in place from the Kansas Department of Health and Environment. The KDHE maintains an up-to-date blue green algae advisory page on their website. According to K-State fisheries and aquatics specialist, Joe Gerken, “The HAB season seems to be starting earlier each year.” Blooms typically occur when water temperatures are above 75 degrees Fahrenheit, although there are some cool season species.

It’s more common for blooms to occur throughout the summer months, with a peak in August. In water, blue-green algal blooms are often described as looking like spilled green paint, or sometime like pea soup. Blooms are not always large, and may cover only a small portion of the waterway with little visible algae present. Blooms can produce a swampy odor when the cells break down.

Humans and animals can become sick from harmful algal blooms if they have contact with water, or breathe in airborne droplets. Some of the signs of HAB illness include vomiting, diarrhea, rash, eye irritation, cough, sore throat, and headache. Symptoms may begin as quickly as hours after exposure, or up to two days. Water contaminated with HAB may also cause aquatic life to die. Landowners are encouraged to maintain ponds and other waterways. The Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks has a publication that provides guidance. This can be found by doing a web search for producing fish and wildlife in Kansas ponds – Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks.

If you suspect you or your pet may have become ill due to exposure with harmful algal blooms, then please seek the advice of a medical professional or veterinarian. It’s best to avoid getting into suspect water sources in general, but one tip to prevent pet exposure, if playing fetch, is to use a toy that will keep their mouth more closed and that is not porous. Examples include a frisbee instead of a tennis ball.

Information comes from K-State Research and Extension fisheries and aquatics specialist, Joe Gerken.