MEDIA RELEASE

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Health Unit warns residents of Blue-Green Algae

Blue-green algae (cyanobacteria) have been identified in provincial water sources. These bacteria occur worldwide especially in calm, nutrient-rich waters. Some species of cyanobacteria produce toxins that affect animals and humans. **People and pets may be exposed to cyanobacterial toxins by drinking contaminated water and by swimming or bathing in contaminated water.**

Disease due to cyanobacterial toxins varies according to the type of toxin and the type of water or water-related exposure (drinking or skin contact).

- Humans are affected with a range of symptoms including skin irritation, stomach cramps, vomiting, nausea, diarrhoea, fever, sore throat, headache, muscle and joint pain, blisters of the mouth and liver damage.
- Swimming in water containing cyanobacterial toxins may lead to allergic reactions, such as asthma, eye irritation, rashes, and blisters around the mouth and nose.
- High levels of toxin-producing cyanobacteria can also poison animals, birds, and fish.
- Some people heavily exposed through drinking and recreational water can require intensive hospital care, but no deaths have been reported.

Cyanobacteria are also known as blue-green algae because these organisms have characteristics of both algae and bacteria, although they are now classified as bacteria. The blue-green colour comes from their ability to photosynthesize, like plants. Not all cyanobacteria of these species form toxins and it is likely that there are as yet unrecognized toxins.

Some species form a scum on the water, but high concentrations may also be present throughout the affected water. **Surface scums, where they occur, represent a specific hazard to human health because of their particularly high toxin content. Contact, especially by children, should be avoided.**

The organisms can grow rapidly in favourable conditions, such as calm nutrient-rich fresh or marine waters in warm climates or during the late summer months in cooler parts of the world. **Blooms of cyanobacteria tend to occur repeatedly in the same water, posing a risk of repeated exposure to some human populations.**

Ways to reduce the harmful effects of blue-green algae:

- Reducing nutrient build-up (eutrophication) in lakes and reservoirs, especially by better management of wastewater disposal systems and control of pollution by fertilizers (including manure) from agriculture.
- Specific water treatment is required to remove the organisms and their toxins from drinking-water supplies.

Boiling affected water does NOT remove the toxin. Water affected by the toxin should not be used for drinking, cooking or bathing. Pets should likewise avoid affected waters.

If your recreational water or drinking water source appears to be affected by blue-green algae, avoid using the water and call the Ministry of Environment Spills Action Centre (1-800-268-6060) and ask to have it tested.

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