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Microcystis Algae Bloom: Frequently Asked Questions Concerning Health Impacts

Q: What is microcystis?

A: Microcystis is a cyanobacteria algae that grows naturally on the surface of many waterbodies. Under certain conditions (such as warm weather and an abundance of nutrients in the water) the algae may undergo an explosive type of growth that results in dense, floating mats of algae. This is commonly referred to as an “algae bloom.”

Q: Can exposure to microcystis cause health problems?

A: Yes. Microcystis is different from most other types of algae because it secretes a toxin into the water. During an algae bloom, the amount of toxin in the water can become elevated and exposure can be potentially harmful to people and animals.

Q: What types of health concerns are associated with exposure to toxins from microcystis?

A: Health concerns vary depending on the type of exposure (contact or ingestion) and the concentrations of microcystis and its toxin, microcystin. Contact with high levels of the cyanobacteria algae has been found to contribute to eye, ear, and skin irritation. More serious health effects (e.g. muscle cramps, twitching) can also occur. If elevated levels of the algal toxin, microcystin, are also present in the water, serious liver damage can result.

Q: How can I reduce my risk of health problems associated with exposure to microcystis?

A: Do not come into contact with water near the algae bloom. This also applies to pets.

Q: How long is the bloom expected to last?

A: Since algae benefit from warm, sunny weather, as the days get shorter and cooler, the algae are likely to dissipate. Any toxins that are in the water will decline as the algae die off. In addition, any rainfall will help to circulate the water and break-up the bloom.

Q: If I have had contact with this water or the algae bloom, what should I do?

A: For questions related to health concerns, contact your health care provider, local board of health, or the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, Center for Environmental Health at (617) 624-5757.