

September 2, 2011

Blue Green Algae at Lake Berryessa

With long summer days and heat, Lake Berryessa becomes an ideal habitat for cyanobacteria. **Cyanobacteria, also referred to as blue-green algae, are a common and natural component of the microscopic plants (plankton) in Lake Berryessa.** Some types of blue-green algae produce natural toxins or poisons. When these algae die and break down, toxins can be released into the water.

Blue-green algae are usually present in lake water in low numbers. But once the water warms up in shallow areas, blue-green algae can become very abundant in some sections of Lake Berryessa. Under calm conditions, blue-green algae can accumulate in thick layers at the surface or along the shoreline. These accumulations are frequently referred to as “blooms” or “scums.” Wind can blow these accumulations around the lake.

While blue-green algae toxins have been detected at many locations in Lake Berryessa, the highest concentrations of toxins are usually found in blooms and shoreline scums. These dense accumulations pose the greatest potential health risks. Watch for dense accumulations of algae and avoid these areas.

Blooms generally have the following properties:

- Water may appear cloudy and look like thick pea soup.
- Blooms are generally green or blue-green in color, although they can be brown or purple.
- A thick mat or foam may form when a bloom washes onto shore.

Weather influences where blue-green algae will accumulate in a given location. During extended periods of calm and sunny days, blooms can accumulate at the surface in any location. Wind and waves may cause them to form along shorelines or in protected areas. Shifts in wind direction can move a bloom from one location to another.

Recreational contact, such as swimming with water not visibly affected by a blue-green algae bloom is not expected to cause health effects. However, some individuals could be especially sensitive to even low levels of algal toxins and might experience mild symptoms such as skin, eye or throat irritation or allergic reactions.

Direct contact or breathing airborne droplets containing high levels of blue-green algal toxins during swimming or showering can cause irritation of the skin, eyes, nose and throat and inflammation in the respiratory tract.

If you have any questions or concerns, call the Lake Berryessa Ranger Department at 707-966-2111 ext. 113.

