



Department of Health
Agency of Human Services



Residents Along the Lake Are On the Lookout for Blue-Green Algae

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Media Contact: Communication Office
Vermont Department of Health
802-863-7281

HIGHGATE - Mike Roche has been a summer resident along Missisquoi Bay for the past 69 years, enjoying the view from a screened-in porch and dock that reaches out into the water. One of the few times he will not sit out in the evening is after a hot summer day when there is a green film on the surface of the water and along the shoreline.

“If the wind is blowing right and you have a good algae bloom going, it will keep you from going out on the porch,” Roche said. “The smell will stop you.”

Roche is one of 20 citizen volunteer water samplers and algae spotters along the lake. He hopes the work he does as part of a collaborative effort with the Vermont Department of Health, Lake Champlain Committee (LCC), University of Vermont and the Lake Champlain Basin Program will help scientists develop solutions to prevent or kill off blooms, which have appeared outside his camp for more than 10 years.

Some kinds of blue-green algae produce dangerous toxins. Skin contact with the algae can result in irritation or allergic reactions, and drinking algae that is producing toxins can result in nausea, vomiting and diarrhea. Children are considered to be at higher risk because they are more likely to drink the water.

Common purification methods such as boiling, ultraviolet light and chlorination will not completely destroy blue-green algae toxins. The toxins can also be inhaled or swallowed when swimming, water skiing or using a jet ski.

No human cases of illness related to blue-green algae have been documented in Vermont since the Health Department and partner agencies, including the University of Vermont Rubenstein School of Environment and Natural Resources, started a comprehensive surveillance and monitoring system in 1999.

During the summers of 1999 and 2000 two dogs died after drinking large amounts of water from a toxic blue-green algae bloom in Lake Champlain.

Recruiting citizen volunteers like Roche for the 2011 summer season is another way health officials, LCC and other partners hope to raise awareness about algae.

“Nobody knew what algae was when I was a kid,” Roche said, “but we did get a lot of times when the weeds got very thick around Missisquoi Bay. Everybody should be aware of it. It is the one thing that will keep us out of the water this time of year.”

Report blooms to the Health Department by calling 1-800-439-8550 (VT only). Homeowner toxin test kits can be purchased from the Health Department Laboratory at 1-800-660-9997 (VT only).

Track algae blooms on Lake Champlain. Look for the algae status map on the Health Department’s website at <http://www.healthvermont.gov>

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Vermont Department of Health | 108 Cherry Street | Burlington, VT 05402
Voice: 802-863-7200 | In Vermont 800-464-4343 | Fax: 802-865-7754 | TTY/TDD: Dial 711 first
Health Care Provider Infectious Disease Reporting: 802-863-7240 or 800-640-4374
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