

ALGAL BLOOMS : INFORMATION FOR VIRGINIA’S WORKING WATERFRONT



Aerial photo of algae bloom on York River
Photo credit: VIMS

What is an algal bloom?

Algae are naturally-occurring microscopic organisms that are found in fresh and salt waters of Virginia and around the world. Algae may multiply rapidly when environmental conditions are favorable, such as after a rain has washed nutrients from the land into the river. A great number of algal cells in the water results in what is called an algal bloom.

What does it look like?

Algal blooms often result in a noticeable change in the color of the water due to the color of the pigments inside the algal cells. They can be many colors, but are most commonly red or brown and are referred to as “red” or “brown” tides. An odor may also be present in the vicinity of the bloom. Some algae can produce a bioluminescence, glowing bright blue at night.

How common are they?

Algal blooms occur in the lower Chesapeake Bay during the spring and summer. Algae respond to the same conditions that encourage plant growth on land, and are most likely to form blooms when waters are warm and nutrient rich. Certain blooms are predictable, like those which occur in summer each year in the lower York River near Gloucester Point and Yorktown beaches, in the Lower James offshore of Norfolk Beaches, and at the mouths of the James and York Rivers.

Are they harmful?

Most algae do not harm people, wildlife, or the environment. However, some types of algae in Virginia are dangerous and can affect fish and humans, as well as other animals like birds and marine mammals. These are known as Harmful Algal Blooms (HABs).

There have been reports of work-related exposures to HABs resulting in health effects which include mild burning or tingling of the skin, watery eyes, runny nose, or mouth irritation. **If you are concerned that you have been exposed to a HAB, please see your doctor and report health effects to the VA HAB Hotline.**

What should I do if I see an algal bloom?

When in doubt, stay out (this goes for pets too). Avoid contact with the water in areas with a visible bloom, or water with unusual color or odor, or if dead fish are observed. If you come in contact with bloom water, wash skin thoroughly with clean water. If you cannot avoid contact, protect skin by wearing gloves, waders or thigh boots and avoid eye splash by using protective eyewear. If you are concerned about an exposure to bloom water, please see your doctor and call your local health department. Telling your doctor about contact with water and the specific location may help treat any symptoms properly.

**WHEN IN DOUBT
STAY OUT!**

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Avoid contact by wearing protective gear (gloves, waders, eyewear, etc.)
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Wash exposed skin w/ fresh water
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See your doctor if you have health effects
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Report health effects to the Virginia HAB Hotline (888) 238-6154

Report HABs, fish kills, and suspected health effects to the HAB Hotline 888-238-6154.

Visit www.SwimHealthyVa.com for more information on algal bloom activity or to submit an online HAB report.