

Beware of Algae Blooms!

Giving your dog an opportunity to swim in a pond, river or other body of water might seem like a refreshing late-summer activity, but it can be deadly if you are not careful. Most people have heard of "red tide," which is a toxic algae bloom in the ocean that kills fish and affects the eyes and lungs of people in surrounding areas. It turns out that not all algae are red, and these other blue-green algae prefer freshwater ponds, lakes, rivers and other standing bodies of water. Although more common in the warmer temperatures of summer these algae blooms can occur at any time of the year in warmer climates such as Florida.

They also are found all over the world, so pet owners need to be aware, no matter where they live or travel. They are most prevalent in areas where there are a lot of nutrients in the water from agricultural nutrients and fertilizers. It is critical to remember that parks and areas not normally associated with agriculture also use fertilizers. Mid to late summer-when there is a lot of rain coupled with hot weather-is considered peak season, but it is best to be aware of the possibility at all times. Certainly, if you see a pond covered in green, slimy-looking substance, do not let your pets drink from it or swim in the water. But, during the times of year I mentioned above, it is best not to let them swim in any standing bodies of water at all.

The Hidden Dangers Lurking in Still Waters

These algae produce toxins that have adverse effects on people as well as pets and other animals. As the bloom grows and the colonies form on the surface of the water, you can see the blue-green color that many of us call "scum." Since it is floating on top of the water, wind blows it into thick concentrated areas that we obviously would avoid. If you see such an area in a pond or lake, it is best to stay away from the entire body of water altogether, because the algae are still in the water and can sicken your dog even in seemingly clear areas. Although not all blue-green algae is toxic, it is impossible to know if what we are observing is toxic or not. If it is, tragedy can result. Even brief exposure to algae- which can occur if your dog jumps in the water and then licks his fur or even swallows a small amount of the water-can have a fatal outcome in a short period of time. Fatalities result from damage to the liver and nervous system. Symptoms of exposure to toxic algae include:

***Vomiting**

***Diarrhea**

***Extreme thirst**

***Pale gums that also can turn blue**

***Weakness and staggering**

***Disorientation**

***Difficulty breathing**

***Tremors that can lead to stiff rigid muscles and paralysis**

***Seizures**

***Convulsions**

***Death**

Death can come quickly if there is paralysis of the breathing muscles, but it can take a few days if there is liver failure. Just wading along the shoreline can be very dangerous if the wind has concentrated the algae in that area.

What can be Done?

There is no antidote for these toxins, but veterinarians can act to try to treat the symptoms and counteract some of the health issues. Seeing a veterinarian immediately if you suspect a problem is the best course of action. Washing your pet off and calling a pet poison control hotline are also wise things to do. In previous articles, I have discussed the dangers of standing water containing dangerous microbes, such as Leptospirosis, and parasites, such as giardia and coccidian. I also have advised you to not let your pets drink from puddles and to stay up to date on vaccines to prevent Lepto. Twice yearly parasite checks also should be performed on your pets. I am not saying that you cannot let your pet enjoy a nice swim, but be mindful of the conditions. Moving water is safer, and always take a good look around before you or your dog go into the water or even get close enough for your pet to take a drink.