

Harbour slime is toxic, city confirms

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Toxic slime is showing up more often in the harbour.

The city sent off for analysis samples of the blue-green algae-like substance that has been coating wildlife.

And it confirmed the slime was toxic yesterday afternoon. Experts have already warned it can cause eye or skin irritation on contact, and vomiting and headaches if ingested.

"It seemed to be occurring about once every two years in the harbour and then we had it in 2006 and again in 2007, I believe," said Jim Hudson, executive director of the Bay Area Restoration Council .

"Then this year we're seeing it twice in one year so the frequency in the last few years, it looks like it's starting to increase."

The slime also appeared in August.

Hudson says this is the first time the slime, caused by cyanobacteria, has shown up as late as October. It typically blooms in warm water, usually in August.

"We will be monitoring to see where there are additional blooms," said Bob Hart, an environmental health manager with public health services. "And there has been some discussion about whether we'll extend our monitoring for blue-green algae beyond the time that we normally do our beach monitoring program."

Hart says the city currently monitors for the bacteria between the May 24 weekend and Labour Day weekend.

Hudson says cyanobacteria is usually a result of phosphorous and has three varieties, affecting the brain, liver and skin. Hudson says Canada has never had a human death from the bacteria.

Hart says cyanobacteria can cause deaths in birds and fish that ingest it, but none has been seen.

Hudson says the phosphorous is typically runoff from agricultural operations or lawn fertilizer.

It can also come from one of the city's four wastewater treatment plants that discharge into the harbour.

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