

Slime coating Hamilton Harbour potentially toxic blue-green algae: officials

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The Hamilton Spectator

October 9, 2008

Public health officials have confirmed the slimy goo coating areas of the Hamilton Harbour is potentially toxic blue-green algae.

Now, the city awaits lab test results to determine if the sludge is producing toxins. The results are expected Friday, said Bob Hart of Hamilton's public health department.

"Until we can get the testing done, we're warning people to stay away from it," Hart said.

Blue-green algae, also known as cyanobacteria, are naturally occurring organisms that have been on the earth for more than two billion years. They often bloom in warm, slow-moving, shallow water rich in nutrients, such as phosphorus.

The city has erected signs along the coastline warning people to stay away from the water, and marinas in the area have been told about the potential danger, Hart said.

The Ministry of the Environment says exposure to toxic blue-green algae can cause skin or eye irritation from contact, and vomiting, headaches, fever and diarrhea if ingested. It can also be very harmful for pets and wildlife.

Blue-green algae outbreaks are often triggered by big rainstorms that send phosphorus-rich fertilizers into the water, said Jim Hudson, executive director of the Bay Area Restoration Council. He says there's usually a six-week lag time between storms and blooms, as the algae grow under the surface.

There are ways to treat blue-green algae blooms, Hudson says, though that process can release the toxins that cyanobacteria store within their cell walls.

"Sometimes, the treatment is worse than the disease," he says.

Hudson believes this bloom poses very little danger to Hamilton's water supply, as the intake lines draw water from Lake Ontario.

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