



“Is it Safe to Swim in the Lake?”

by Andrea LaMoreaux, NH LAKES



“Is it safe to swim in the lake?” I know that a summer holiday week must be approaching since this is a common phone call we get at NH LAKES as people plan their summer vacations at one of New Hampshire’s approximately 1,000 lakes.

My reply to these typically nervous callers is, “Well, generally, yes, most of New Hampshire’s lakes are relatively clean and provide for healthy and safe swimming. We are fortunate that the Granite State is home to some of the nation’s cleanest, and most beautiful, waterbodies. However, with that said, I can’t completely guarantee that you, your son or daughter, and/or their friends won’t get sick or injured from swimming in the lake.” This is often followed by a long pause and sighs by the caller.

So, I continue, “Fortunately, with a little bit of common sense and planning ahead, you and your family and friends can drastically reduce the chances of getting sick or hurt while swimming in New Hampshire’s lakes.”

The caller typically perks up and asks, “Really, how?”

Here’s how...

Look before you leap. Despite what you might have heard on the radio or read in the newspaper, New Hampshire is not the toxic algae capital of the world. Exposure to or ingestion of toxic algae (scientifically referred to as toxic ‘cyanobacteria’) can cause adverse health effects in humans such as skin irritations and, more seriously, liver, kidney, and central nervous system damage. Although advisories are typically issued by the New Hampshire Department of Environmental Services (DES) during the latter-half of summer to warn the public about the potential danger of recreating in certain waterbodies experiencing a toxic cyanobacteria bloom, most lakes do not experience this phenomenon. However, if the area of the lake that you want to swim

in looks like someone dumped pea soup, antifreeze, or blue-green paint into it, don't leap in—instead, avoid contact with the water and report the potentially toxic bloom to DES by texting a photo of the bloom and location to the Harmful Algal and Cyanobacterial Bloom Program at NHDES at 603-848-8094 or email photos to HAB@des.nh.gov.

Refrain from feeding the ducks and geese. Feeding the waterfowl can cause swimmer's itch. Swimmer's itch is a skin rash caused by an allergic reaction to contact with certain parasites of birds and mammals. Here's how it happens: The adult parasite lives in the bloodstream of infected host animals such as ducks, geese, gulls, and swans. The parasites produce eggs that are passed in the feces of the host bird or mammal. When the animal feces land in the water, snails become infected with these parasites and release the swimmer's itch organism into the water. Unfortunate people swimming nearby may become infected. Symptoms include tingling, burning, or itching of the skin within minutes or days after exposure. Small reddish pimples appear within 12 hours, which may develop into small blisters. Itching may last up to a week or more, but will gradually go away.

Avoid swimming in areas frequented by waterfowl. Believe it or not, biologists have discovered that one goose can consume up to four pounds of grass per day, creating about three pounds of fecal matter daily! When waterfowl defecate near shore or in the water they create a health risk to humans. Not only could their fecal matter contain the swimmer's itch organism, but their fecal matter naturally contains large amounts of fecal bacteria, commonly known as *Escherichia coli* (*E. coli*). If a person swimming in water that contains large amounts of *E. coli* accidentally ingests the water, he/she may experience gastrointestinal problems such as nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea.

Avoid swimming in weedy areas of the lake. In some areas of New Hampshire's lakes, there are dense growths of the aquatic invasive plant variable milfoil. This plant has been said to look like a fuzzy green pipe cleaner, a green feather boa, or a tall, skinny underwater Christmas tree. Since this plant is not native to our lakes, it has no predators that eat it. This lack of natural enemies allows it to grow up to an inch per day and up to approximately 15 feet in length! While we are not aware of this long, spindly plant causing any drowning deaths in New Hampshire, there are accounts of it entangling unsuspecting swimmers in other states.

Refrain from swimming in any waterbody right after a heavy rain or flood event. When it rains, runoff water from the landscape carries pollutants into streams, rivers, lakes, and ponds. Runoff typically contains pesticides, oil, unwanted nutrients, and bacteria, all of which can make swimmers sick.

By following these simple tips, you can help ensure that you and your family and friends will have a safe, healthy, and enjoyable time swimming in New Hampshire's lakes this summer.

NH LAKES is the only statewide, publicly supported nonprofit organization working to keep New Hampshire's lakes clean and healthy, now and in the future. The organization works with partners, promotes clean water policies and responsible use, and inspires the public to care for our lakes. For information, visit www.nhlakes.org, email info@nhlakes.org, or call 603.226.0299. *We hope that you will share this article with others—we just ask that you include the following: This article was originally published by NH LAKES. Thank you!*