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**Blue-Green Algae Causes Closures of Beaches in Putnam County;
Health Department Launches On-site Testing**

Brewster, NY—As temperatures soar, residents look to cool off in local lakes and beaches.

Unfortunately, recent blue-green algae blooms have forced multiple beach closures because of the toxic nature and negative health effects of the algae, known as cyanobacteria. These microscopic organisms are naturally present in lakes and streams, but sometimes undergo rapid growth with lots of sunlight and increased levels of nitrogen and phosphorus, which can result from leaking septic systems, fertilizer and storm water run-off. Beaches can only reopen after clearance from the health department, based on a lab test indicating a return to an acceptable level of bacteria.

“The health department has begun on-site testing to expedite this process,” explains Health Commissioner Allen Beals, MD. “Previously samples were sent to an outside laboratory and testing could take three to four days. With this new procedure, if the test indicates it is safe to swim or wade, we can reopen beaches the same day,” continues Dr. Beals. “In this way residents can return to their favorite in-water activities as soon as possible.”

Health effects from contact with the poisonous algae may include irritation of the skin, eyes, nose, throat and respiratory tract. If swallowed, high levels of the bacteria can cause nausea, diarrhea and vomiting. In addition to ingesting the tainted water or surface scums, inhaling

airborne droplets or simply skin contact can cause problems. The Health Department works with local town officials to monitor blue-green algae. Town officials must close a beach when there is visible presence of cyanobacteria, which can include water discoloration, floating film or scum, or an unpleasant odor.

There are water treatments to reduce the blooms but prevention is by far the best tactic. Treatments can involve use of algaecides, but they are not without the disadvantages of any pesticide. Treatment methods, if any, are strictly a town decision, and application of an algaecide requires approval by the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC). Prevention involves reducing fertilizer use, keeping septic systems running efficiently and managing storm water.

When the water clears, either naturally or by treatment, the town cannot automatically reopen the beach. Water testing must be conducted to ensure resident safety. The new on-site testing by the health department speeds this process for only a nominal charge of \$25 to cover the test materials.

“There is widespread agreement within the scientific community that the incidents of harmful algae blooms are increasing both in the U.S., and worldwide,” says Dr. Beals. “We should redouble our efforts to reduce or eliminate the causes.”

The Health Department’s mission is to improve and protect the health of the Putnam County community, composed of nearly 100,000 residents. Core services include community health assessment, disease surveillance and control, emergency preparedness, environmental health protection, family health promotion and health education. For more information, please visit our website at www.putnamcountyny.com/health or visit our social media sites on Facebook at www.facebook.com/putnamhealth and Twitter @PutnamHealthNY.

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