



## PUTNAM COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

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[www.putnamcountyny.gov/health](http://www.putnamcountyny.gov/health)

A PHAB-ACCREDITED HEALTH DEPARTMENT

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### **Blue-Green Algae Arrives Early, Again**

BREWSTER, NY— Blue-green algal blooms have arrived early for the second consecutive year. So far this year, seven public beaches in Putnam County have been closed due to harmful growth. Harmful algal blooms (HABs) are more than a simple nuisance. They can present a serious health hazard.

Residents should be cautious when swimming, boating, or even just cooling off in waters with any algae.

The increasing number of HABs in Putnam is not entirely unexpected and county staff have been preparing. Earlier this year, the Putnam County Department of Health held a seminar with the support of the New York State (NYS) departments of Health and Environmental Conservation. Beach and water operators, along with residents, were invited to learn about ways to reduce the health risks of algal blooms. NYS funds are also being set aside to protect vulnerable lakes and other waterbodies from HABs.

“These harmful blooms are a significant issue for our county,” says County Executive MaryEllen Odell. “We have a number of beautiful lakes that have been affected. This can cause problems for recreation, and potentially for the quality of our drinking water. State funding and expertise will help us combat this problem.”

“Warming temperatures may be to blame in part for the increasing number and duration of blue-green algae blooms,” explains Michael Nesheiwat, MD, Interim Commissioner of Health. “The type in Putnam is technically known as cyanobacteria. These toxin-producing microscopic organisms are harmful to humans and animals if swallowed. At high levels, ingestion may cause nausea, diarrhea and vomiting, along with irritation of the skin, eyes, nose, throat, and respiratory tract.”

Toxic bacteria are naturally present in low numbers in lakes and streams. However, in warm, shallow, undisturbed surface water that gets a lot of sunlight, the bacteria can grow quickly and easily, creating a bloom. When this happens, floating scums on the water surface may appear, along with discolored water covering all or portions of a lake.

The Putnam County Department of Health (PCDOH) closely monitors permitted bathing beaches, performing periodic checks at regular weekly or biweekly intervals depending on the situation. The PCDOH also responds to calls from town, village and summer camp personnel. However, when there is visible presence of blue-green algae, operators of permitted beaches must close their beach. Colors can also range from green, blue, brown, yellow, grey, or even red. Contact should be avoided with any discolored water, with or without a floating covering or unpleasant odor. When the water clears, either naturally or by treatment, follow-up water testing must be conducted. Toxins can still be present even after the bloom looks like it has passed.

“Only after a satisfactory result on a water test are town and beach personnel permitted to re-open the beach,” explains associate public health sanitarian Shawn Rogan. “We work closely with the towns to reopen the beach as soon as possible. If the water tests are acceptable, we can usually open a beach within two days.”

The PCDOH has four recommendations for residents to protect themselves from HABs. Avoiding exposure to all visible algae blooms is the number-one precaution. In addition to not swimming, even playing by the water, wading, or water-skiing may cause accidental swallowing, skin exposure, or inhalation of airborne droplets, and all should be avoided. Use added caution with open cuts or sores. The second precaution is not to allow young children or pets to play in water where an algal bloom is present. The third is to wash hands and body thoroughly if any exposure occurs, and the fourth is not to use any water from lakes with algal blooms for drinking unless treated through a municipal water treatment plant.

There are water treatments to reduce the blooms in lakes but prevention is by far the best tactic. Treatments can involve the use of algacides, but they have the same precautions as any pesticide.

Treatment methods, if any, are strictly a town decision, and application of an algaecide requires approval by the DEC. Other prevention efforts involve community-wide efforts to reduce plant fertilizer use, promote efficient septic systems operations, and to manage storm water. Each of these strategies for residents helps to control the level of nutrients the algae receive and may limit their growth. These tactics are supported by the DEC, but much is still unknown about the causes of HABs.

“Reducing the use of fertilizer in a community may reduce the number and severity of blooms,” adds Mr. Rogan. “However blooms have also occurred in remote Adirondack lakes as well.”

The mission of the Putnam County Department of Health, nationally accredited by the Public Health Accreditation Board (PHAB), 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 County website at [www.putnamcountyny.com](http://www.putnamcountyny.com); or visit our social media sites on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/putnamhealth](http://www.facebook.com/putnamhealth) and Twitter @PutnamHealthNY.

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