



To:	General Practices, Pharmacists, After-Hours Centres and Emergency Departments in the greater Wellington region
From:	Dr Jill McKenzie, Medical Officer of Health
Date:	29 November 2017
Title:	Public Health Alert: Toxic Algae Alert

Please distribute the following information to relevant staff in your organisation.

All public health alerts are available at www.rph.org.nz (health professionals – public health alerts)

Hutt River Toxic Algae Alert

Key points

- Swimmers have been recommended to stay out of the Hutt river below Kaitoke due to the sudden increase in the number of toxic algae mats floating down the river and the increased risk of accidental ingestion of the toxic algae (cyanobacteria).
- Although ingestion of toxic algae by humans is unlikely, even small amounts could cause serious illness and potentially be fatal.
- The public has been advised to contact their doctor or Healthline 0800 611 116 if concerned about health symptoms following recent exposure to toxic algae.
- Symptoms of cyanotoxin poisoning include nausea, vomiting, numbness, tingling, muscle twitches, weakness, breathing difficulties and although unlikely, potentially convulsions, paralysis and death. Cyanobacteria can also be irritant to skin and the upper respiratory tract.
- Symptoms following exposure would be expected to occur soon after exposure and exposure from swimming without symptoms several hours later should not be of concern.
- Report any potential illness from toxic algal exposure to Regional Public Health.
- In general, treatment should be aimed at symptom relief. Consideration of other potential causes for the symptoms is also advisable.

The information contained in this message is legally privileged and confidential. If the reader of this message is not the intended recipient, you are hereby notified that use, dissemination, distribution or reproduction of this message is prohibited. If you have received this message in error, please notify us immediately. Thank you.



Current situation

Greater Wellington Regional Council and Regional Public Health have issued a warning to users of the Hutt River to stay out of the river below Kaitoke, due to the increased risk of swallowing potentially fatal toxic algae (toxin producing cyanobacteria).

The risk to human health is from **accidental ingestion** of a small piece of algae (more correctly know as cyanobacteria). Although ingestion is unlikely the potential for harm is potentially high. The cyanobacteria are known to produce large amounts of cyanotoxins that have been associated with dog deaths in previous years. How much cyanotoxin is contained within a small piece of algae can be very variable. In general the cyanotoxins most likely produced are anatoxin-a and homoanatoxin-a.

Symptoms from cyanotoxin exposure include gastrointestinal upset, sensory changes, and breathing difficulties. There is a potential for significant ingestion of cyanotoxin (e.g. by ingestion of a piece of algae) to be associated with paralysis, convulsions and potentially death. Symptoms usually occur within a matter of hours, so potential exposures with no symptom development in the subsequent hours are unlikely to be of concern. Direct physical contact with cyanobacterial mats can be associated with skin and upper respiratory tract irritation.

There are no documented reports of serious illness from recreational exposure to cyanotoxins as ingestion of the algae is an unlikely event – it has a strong and very unpleasant odour. International reports of serious illness and deaths have been associated with specific types of cyanotoxins (e.g. microcystin associated with hepatotoxicity) following contamination of drinking water supplies.

Treatment should be aimed at symptomatic relief or supportive measures and include consideration of other potential causes due to the non-specific nature of cyanotoxin exposure symptoms.

Suspected cases of human illness associated with cyanotoxin exposure should be reported to Regional Public Health 04 570 9002.

Further information is available at:

<http://www.gw.govt.nz/toxic-algae-faqs/> for further information on toxic algae and alerts

National Poisons Centre 0800 764 766 (0800 POISONS) – for advice on health concerns.