The Dangers of Blue Green Algae

Despite the recent cold in Oklahoma, summer is just around the corner. It is not too early to begin thinking about a trip to your favorite lake. But what if that trip could make you sick? For the past two years, with excessive heat and lack of rainfall, Oklahomans have seen their lakes impacted by blue-green algae (BGA) blooms that can cause illness.

BGA are present in all Oklahoma lakes and most ponds but usually remain at low levels. Problems can occur when they become abundant, forming visible “blooms.” Blooms tend to occur during warm periods, especially during droughts. Increased nutrient runoff and stagnant water increases the chance of a bloom.

BGA blooms turn water green or greenish brown. They can form floating mats (“moss”) and scums on the water surface.

BGA can produce chemicals that are toxic to humans and other animals. This is usually a concern only during blooms. Livestock and pet (but no human) deaths due to BGA blooms have been reported in Oklahoma. Even our elected officials are not immune, as Senator Jim Inhofe reported becoming “deathly sick” following a swim in Grand Lake during a BGA bloom in 2011.

The toxins produced by BGA can affect you or your animals if you or they swim in, drink, or even breathe in mist of contaminated water. Dogs seem particularly susceptible. The OK Department of Health lists the following symptoms (by type of contact):

- Skin Exposure: rash, hives, or skin blisters.
- Ingestion: severe stomach cramps, nausea, diarrhea or vomiting.
- Inhalation: runny eyes, runny nose, sore throat, or asthma-like symptoms.

Although there are no antidotes for the toxins, if you experience any of these symptoms following an encounter with BGA, you should seek medical help for treatment of the symptoms.

More information can be found at
http://www.ok.gov/health/Disease_Prevention_Preparedness/Acute_Disease_Service/Disease_Information/Blue-Green_Algae.html