Summertime Algae Can Raise Concerns for Dog Lovers

Pet owners planning outings to our nation's lakes, rivers and streams may soon be adding a new item to their safety checklist: an algae check.

Most algal blooms just make playing in the water unappealing; however, there are some real risks if dogs swim in, wade, or drink from water with algal blooms. Some algae, known as harmful algal blooms, produce toxins that can sicken pets, causing everything from mild eye irritations and diarrhea to more extreme health problems, including liver poisoning and even death.

Harmful algal blooms are often triggered by excessive levels of the nutrients nitrogen and phosphorus. Many of our lakes, rivers, and bays are becoming overloaded with nutrients from a wide range of sources. Excess nutrients fuel the growth of algae, sometimes into an explosion of vast — and sometimes toxic — colonies of slime.

Here are some tips to help cut the risks of your dog's exposure:

- When in doubt, stay out. Don't let your dog swim, drink from or wade in water that is discolored, where the water has a strong smell, or where you see foam, scum, or mats of algae.
- Closed means closed. Follow posted advisories.
- Rinse it off. If your dog swims in scummy water, rinse it off immediately—do not let them lick the algae off their fur.
- Seek veterinary treatment right away if you think your pet may have been poisoned by a harmful algal bloom.
- Report suspected incidents to your Public Health Department.

Everyone can help make a difference. One easy way to combat algae is to take care not to over fertilize. And don't forget to pick up your pet's waste, which transmits bacteria as well as nutrients. For more information, visit http://www2.epa.gov/nutrientpollution/protect-your-pooch.