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BEOH Numbered Memo 1

To: State of Wisconsin Health Care Providers

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Upcoming Harmful Algal Bloom Season And Reporting Human Illnesses

Summary

This memo brings attention to the upcoming harmful algal bloom (HAB) season and reminds Wisconsin health care providers to report suspected HAB-related human illnesses. Harmful algal blooms are the rapid growth of algae or cyanobacteria in water that can harm people, animals, or the environment. Cyanobacteria illnesses are a category II reportable disease. Reporting a HAB exposure illness triggers a coordinated investigation conducted by the Wisconsin Department of Health Services (DHS) and the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR).

Background

In 2025, DHS investigated 23 human illnesses related to HABs, but illnesses potentially related to HABs are largely under reported. Most cyanobacteria blooms usually occur in nutrient-rich lakes during warm, calm weather, beginning in spring and ending in late fall. People can become ill from cyanobacteria toxins through ingestion, direct skin contact, or inhalation.

Diagnosis: There are no clinically available diagnostic tests for cyanotoxins. Diagnosis is often based on symptoms following exposure to contaminated water.

Treatment: Medical care is supportive, as there are no specific treatments or antidotes for cyanotoxin poisoning.

Symptoms: Symptoms vary depending on the toxin and exposure route, can appear within hours after exposure and can affect the skin, respiratory, gastrointestinal, and nervous systems.

Reporting

Health care providers should report all suspected cases of cyanotoxin poisoning to public health and the Wisconsin Electronic Disease Surveillance System (WEDSS) as suspect cases. Final case definitions will be applied by DHS staff at the conclusion of the case investigation and assessment. Alternatively, cases can be reported directly to DHS staff by phone or email.

For more information

<https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/algae/index.htm>

<https://www.cdc.gov/harmful-algal-blooms/about/index.html>

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