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Stay out of the scums,' Vermont officials warn

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Keegan Bradley at PGA



Yoga on Church Street



Written by **Matt Sutkoski**, Free Press Staff Writer

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Saturday morning was very warm and humid along the shore of Lake Champlain, but the lake looked like it was frozen, said Cathy Griffin, who has a summer place along the water in Highgate Springs.

The near shore was coated in white, as if covered in a snowy layer of ice, she said. Closer inspection revealed a thick layer of white scum that smelled awful, Griffin said. She and her neighbors suspected toxic algae, and they were careful to keep themselves and their pets out of the water.

Good move, said Mary Watzin of the Rubenstein School of Environmental and Natural Resources at the University of Vermont. Watzin, a biologist who oversees the blue-green algae monitoring program, saw pictures of the white scum and offered a preliminary diagnosis. "I'm pretty sure that this is blue-green algae," she said. "The scum starts to

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die in the intense sun, and this bleaching can sometimes occur.”

Blue-green algae are sometimes toxic. They can kill dogs who drink algae-laden water, and they can make swimmers sick.

Watzin said a flurry of blue-green algae reports came in over the weekend.

Tests that would confirm the presence of potentially toxic blue green algae were not complete as of Monday afternoon, so Watzin couldn't confirm what was in Griffin's photos.

“We do all of our sampling on Monday and Tuesday, then run our analyses on Wednesday and Thursday,” Watzin said. She said she received reports of possible blue green algae at Rock Point, near Burlington's North Beach. State health officials collected a water sample from North Beach to test whether algae are there.

Watzin said it's impossible to tell whether an algae bloom is toxic just by looking at it. Any time water looks green, blue green, white or otherwise odd, people and pets should stay away, she said.

Bill Bress of the Vermont Department of Health concurred. “Stay out of the scums,” he said.

Watzin said she's not surprised by recent reports of possible blue green algae in Lake Champlain because it thrives in the kind of hot weather the area has experienced in recent weeks.

The blue green algae first appeared this season near Burlington and in Missisquoi and St. Albans bays during a mid-July heat wave.

Health and environmental officials worried that algae would be a worse problem than usual on Lake Champlain this summer because of huge amounts of phosphorus washed into the lake by record spring flooding.

Griffin, of Mississauga, Ontario, spends summers in Highgate. She said the algae have been a moderate problem there this summer.

“Overall, it has not been bad until this weekend,” she said.

“Everybody around here knows about it. Don't let your dog off the leash or let them go in the water.”

The white scum dissipated Saturday afternoon, she said. Monday, the water looked greenish and an odor lingered, signaling the possibility algae remained.

Watzin said wind and currents can move algae around the lake, so there's no telling where it will show up next.

Contact Matt Sutkoski at 660-1846 or

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