



Maryland Urges Caution for Hunters for Poplar Harbor, Coaches, and Jefferson Islands

Because of recent die-offs of migratory birds on Poplar Island, the Maryland Departments of Health and Mental Hygiene, Natural Resources, and Environment urge waterfowl hunters to avoid consuming the liver or other internal organs of any ducks and geese from the area of Poplar, Coaches, and Jefferson Islands.

Although the bird die-offs are still under investigation, possible causes include poisoning due to toxic blue-green algae (*Microcystis*) or avian botulism. The large number of birds affected and the possibility of consuming contaminated waterfowl have prompted the State to alert waterfowl hunters to the potential human health hazard.

Hunters are encouraged to:

1. Avoid eating any waterfowl that appear ill;
2. Discard the liver and internal organs of any birds harvested from this area; and
3. Cook meat thoroughly. Bird muscle tissue may contain significantly less toxin than internal organs and therefore is less of a threat to human health. However, cooking the meat may not completely eliminate the algal toxin (it will destroy the avian botulism toxin).

Symptoms associated with consumption could include mild gastrointestinal distress or other non-specific symptoms. Higher levels of consumption could lead to more serious health consequences.

Harmful algae blooms and avian botulism occur throughout the Chesapeake Bay and are more likely to occur in areas with high nutrient levels, sunlight, and warmer temperatures. If you observe blue-green algae blooms, you should limit physical contact with the bloom, wash any skin that comes into contact with soap and water and avoid swallowing water in the area of the bloom.

Avian botulism affects mostly birds, but most animals – including horses, cattle, dogs, fish and wildlife animals – can be poisoned by blue-green algae blooms. Animals affected by either avian botulism or algal toxin may show similar symptoms, including: muscle tremors, decreased movement and difficult breathing, weak flight, or head droop. They may collapse and go into convulsions. Many of the sick birds in this recent die-off were very weak and could not fly. Some had no symptoms other than collapse and death.

For health related questions, contact the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene toll-free at 1-866-703-3266.

