

The Impact of Water Treatment Plant Processes on Algae and Algal Toxins

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Algae causes many issues with water treatment plant operations including: clogging of intake screens, fouling of weirs, disruption of floc settling, production of algal mats, filter clogging from algae or from extracellular organic matter (EOM), increase coagulant demand, increased chlorine demand, increased disinfection by products, pH fluctuations, tastes and odors and release of algal toxins.

What may be lesser known is that water treatment processes also have an effect on algae, and as more and more interest is focused on algal toxins it is important to consider these impacts.

First, algal toxins are produced by cyanobacteria, which is commonly called blue-green algae although it is not really an algae. Second, algal toxins are released from cyanobacteria as a bloom nears the end of its lifecycle, or the cells are lysed (split apart) and the toxins are released.

Regulatory Background

The USEPA has listed three algal toxins on the Candidate Contaminant List 3 (CCL3): Anatoxin-a, Microcystin-LR, and Cylindrospermopsin. The World Health Organization (WHO) has established a health-based drinking water guideline of 1.0 ppb for Microcystin-LR. The Australian standard is 1.3 ppb for total microcystins, while Health Canada has proposed a similar standard of 1.5 ppb for total microcystins.

In addition to the health guidelines listed above, short-term exposure recommendations have been developed by United Kingdom Water Industry Research (UKWIR). They have developed Short-term No Adverse Response Levels (SNARLs) for three algal toxins, which may be more representative of levels of concern for a short-term algal bloom. The 24-hour and 7-day SNARLs are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Short-Term No Adverse Response Levels (SNARLs) from UKWIR

Algal Toxin	24 hour health-based SNARL	7 day health-based SNARL
Microcystin-LR	12 ug/L	6 ug/L
Anatoxin-a	3 ug/L	1.5 ug/L
Cylindrospermopsin	9 ug/l	4.5 ug/L

Source Water Prevention of Algal Blooms

Prevention of algal blooms in source waters generally falls in one of four categories:

- Limiting Light
- Limiting Nutrients
- Mixing/aeration, and
- Biomanipulation

Limiting light may be limited to water treatment plant intakes and basins within the water treatment plant, but structured coverings, floating covers and even “bird balls” have been used to reduce algae growth.

The ratio of nutrients for algal growth is generally C(42):H(8.5):O(57):N(7):P(1), and while very little phosphorous is needed, it is often the focus of most nutrient control strategies. Phosphorous input is usually easier to control than nitrogen, nitrite, nitrate and ammonia. Anoxic zones in lakes and reservoirs can release phosphorous from sediments and are often part of the control strategy.

In-lake treatments to control phosphorous are manifold. Ferric coagulation has been used, but it is difficult to control in anoxic areas. Alum coagulation is a concern because of aluminum toxicity to aquatic species. Lime may effectively precipitate and control phosphorous and generally not lyse cells and release toxins; however, application of lime over large bodies of water may present permitting and logistical challenges.

Dredging of sediments can be an effective long-term phosphorous control strategy. Mixing and aeration have had mixed results, even carefully designed and operated systems have not been effective in some cases. If sufficient mixing volumes are generated, they may be more effective. Mixing and aeration that destratifies deep lakes and reservoirs may be an effective preventative measure to algal blooms. Lake flushing has been shown to be effective if there is sufficient flow of low phosphorous water available. Rotting barley straw has been successful in some cases at applied doses of 5 to 50 g/m³ for green algae & cyanobacteria, however, other types of straw have increased cyanobacteria growth.

Biomanipulation is the removal of fish populations that feed on phytoplankton & benthic feeders, and introduction of predatory fish. This allows zooplankton to consume algae and control blooms. Not all algae is consumed by zooplankton including some cyanobacteria. In some cases zooplankton may cause WTP impacts including filter clogging in a direct filtration plant.

The use of algicides, including copper sulfate, are not recommended because of aquatic species toxicity issues and because they lyse cells and release algal toxins.

Water Treatment Plant Impacts on Algae and Algal Toxins

“Until a bloom collapses or is otherwise affected by some treatment practice, the majority of toxins will be retained within the cells, making removal of intact cells a high treatment priority.”

- Toxic Cyanobacteria in Water: A guide to their public health consequences, monitoring and management, WHO, 1999

Physicochemical water treatment processes have been shown to cause cell lysis and toxin release (James and Fawell, 1991). There have been mixed results on the effect of mixing and transport, including pumping. These may or may not contribute to cell lysing (Dickens and Graham, 1995), (WRc, 1996). Changes in pH from 5 to 9 did not cause any release intracellular toxins (WRc, 1996).

In addition to whether or not water treatment processes can lyse cells, there are three major issues that are of concern: how water treatment processes remove algae, how water treatment processes control

taste and odor compounds that are algal by products (geosmin and MIB) and how water treatment processes control algal toxins.

Riverbank Filtration

Riverbank filtration has been demonstrated to be effective for algae removal, providing 4-log removal of algae cells (USEPA IESWTR). It is also effective for removal of cyanotoxins except during massive blooms (CK Schmidt et al, 2003).

Microstrainers

Microstrainers were shown to result in 40-70% removal of cyanobacteria cells in one study, but removed less than 10% of smaller cells (Mouchet & Bonnelye, 1998). Microstrainers can be difficult to install and operate if the algae species changes or cells mat, and can significantly increase headloss.

Preoxidation

A permanganate dose of 1-8 mg/L was effective for algae & cyanobacteria destruction (Fitzgerald, 1966). Maintaining a chlorine residual was effective at controlling algae within WTP basins with 0.25 to 2 mg/L free chlorine residual (Holden, 1970). Lysing of cells is an issue with preoxidation, so downstream processes must be able to remove metabolites (AWWA 2004)

Chlorination

Studies of treatment for algal toxins using chlorine have shown mixed results.

One study showed a 5 mg/L was ineffective for destroying algal toxin extracts (Hoffman, 1976). A second study demonstrated combined treatment processes which included chlorination at 0.5 mg/L were also ineffective (Keijola *et al.*, 1988; Himberg *et al.*, 1989). A third study showed chlorination achieved negligible reduction in microcystin levels of 0.3-0.5 µg/L in treated water (Lambert *et al.*, 1996). Two studies showed no discernible removal of anatoxin-a by chlorination (Nicholson *et al.*, 1994), (Carlile, 1994). Rositano and Nicholson (1994) also showed that chlorination of anatoxin-a was ineffective with a dose of 15 mg/L at pH 7 for 30 minutes contact time, providing only a 16 per cent removal.

However, chlorination was very effective at destroying microcystin-LR and nodularin with free chlorine residual of 0.5 mg/L after 30 minutes contact time with pH < 8 (Nicholson *et al.*, 1994). Dissolved microcystin-LR and anatoxin-a in the range 5-10 µg/L, using a chlorine residual of 0.7 mg/L showed at pH 5, removal was more than 93 % within 30 minutes but at pH 7 removal reached only 88 per cent after 22 hours (Carlile, 1994), (Croll and Hart, 1996) (Hart *et al.*, 1997).

Cylindrospermopsin can be effectively degraded by chlorination. With cylindrospermopsin concentrations of 17-185 mg/l, a residual chlorine concentration of 0.5 mg/l was sufficient to degrade >99% of cylindrospermopsin. Degradation occurred rapidly (within a minute) over the pH range 6 to 9. The presence of other organic substances consumed chlorine, requiring higher chlorine doses for degradation of cylindrospermopsin. A cylindrospermopsin concentration of 20-24 mg/l was effectively destroyed by a chlorine dose of 4 mg/l at pH 7.2-7.4. A concentration of 100 mg/l was reduced to <0.2 mg/l after 30 minutes contact and a residual chlorine concentration of 0.53 mg/l.

Chloramination

Chloramination was completely ineffective at destroying microcystin-LR and nodularin (Nicholson *et al.*, 1994).

Permanganate

Permanganate at a dose of 1 mg/L achieved 95% removal of microcystin-LR in 30 minutes, however, in the presence of live intact cells removal was much poorer (Rositano, 1996). Similar studies with microcystin and anatoxin-a have shown similar results (Hart and Stott, 1993) (Carlile, 1994) (Croll and Hart, 1996) (WRc, 1996). Longer contact times produced some cell lysis (Lam *et al.*, 1995).

Ozone

The most consistently efficient process for destruction of both ultra- and extracellular microcystins appears to be ozonation, which can rapidly achieve essentially complete destruction of microcystins, nodularin and anatoxin-a at low doses and contact times (Keijola *et al.*, 1988) (Himberg *et al.*, 1989) (Rositano and Nicholson, 1994) (Croll and Hart, 1996) (Rositano *et al.*, 1996) (Hart *et al.*, 1997). At low pH, an ozone dose of as little as 0.4 mg/L removed 97% of *microcystin-LR* (WaterRF, 2010).

A major operational consideration is the ozone demand of the water. At a DOC level of 8.5 mg/L ozone doses above 1 mg/L were necessary to achieve complete microcystin-LR destruction (Rositano and Nicholson, 1994). At low doses up to 0.6 mg/L, ozone degraded DOC and had little effect on microcystin-LR. Only after the DOC demand was satisfied, did the ozone show an effect on microcystin-LR (Hart *et al.*, 1997). With a dose of 0.6 and 1.3 mg/L, Ozone treatment consisted almost entirely of cellular lysis, and only at 2 mg/L was extracellular toxin subsequently converted (Hart *et al.*, 1997).

A solution of 166 mg/l pure microcystin-LR in water was completely destroyed by 0.2 mg ozone/l in 4 minutes (15). When other organic material was present the required dose rate increased, but 1 mg ozone/l almost completely removed 220 mg microcystins/l from an algal extract in 5 minutes. Ozone became less effective at pH values above 7.5. Ozone plus hydrogen peroxide was even more effective. Studies on four different treated waters spiked with 20 mg microcystin LR/l showed that quite low ozone doses (0.15 to 1.1 mg/l) were required for complete removal (62) – these doses were approximately those required to produce an ozone residual.

UV Disinfection and UV-AOP

UV radiation was capable of degrading both microcystin-LR and anatoxin-a, but at very high doses of about 20,000 mWs/cm² (Croll and Hart, 1996), (WRc, 1996). UV alone or UV with hydrogen peroxide achieved about a 50% removal of microcystin-LR after 30 minutes (Rositano and Nicholson, 1994). UV advanced oxidation process with hydrogen peroxide resulted in 50% to 90% with hydrogen peroxide doses of 2 to 4 mg/L and UV intensities of 100 to 900 mJ/cm² (WaterRF, 2010).

Very high concentrations of microcystin-LR (50-200 mg/L) were destroyed after 10 to 40 minutes using UV light in the presence of a titanium dioxide catalyst (Robertson *et al.*, 1997).

Coagulation and Clarification

Efficient removal of algae in coagulation and clarification is dependent on optimization of chemical doses and coagulation pH as well as the characteristics of the algae species.

Coagulant dose necessary for algal removal is proportional to the sum of alkalinity and the logarithm of cell number (Mouchet and Bonn elye, 1998). Minimizing turbidity in jar test is not sufficient to remove algae and cyanobacteria. Zeta potential is a better reflection of cell motility. At insufficient coagulant dose, cyanobacteria will be the last phytoplankton cells to be removed. Coagulation of algal cells that are smooth and more or less spherical occurs largely by charge neutralization (Bernhardt and Clasen, 1991). Filamentous algae, large algae or species with bristles on their cell surface can be dealt with effectively only by sweep coagulation (Bernhardt and Clasen, 1991)

Alum dosed at 120 mg/L with and without polymer removed about 20 per cent of the toxicity from a neurotoxic bloom of *Anabaena circinalis* (Falconer, 1989). For microcystins, coagulation had a negligible capability for removal of any soluble toxins present in water in several studies (WRc, 1996), (Rositano and Nicholson, 1994), (Lambert *et al.* 1996). These studies tested three coagulants: ferric sulfate, alum and polyaluminium chloride. In all cases they found essentially no toxin removal.

Coagulation and clarification studies have had mixed results on cell lysis and the subsequent release of algal toxins. Results were generally thought to be related to cell life-cycle stage (Lam *et al.*, 1995), (Velzeboer *et al.*, 1995) (Chow *et al.*, 1997a) (Drikas *et al.*, 1997).

Clarifier type may also have an effect on algae removal. Sludge blanket-type clarifiers were demonstrated to be substantially more effective than static settlers, particularly upflow pulsed systems – 90-99% phytoplankton removal in 4 plants (Mouchet and Bonn elye, 1998), however, it should be noted that sludge blanket buoyancy can be negatively affected by improper polymer dose.

Dissolved air flotation (DAF) is also more effective than sedimentation processes, and has the added benefit of consistently removing in-tact whole cells. DAF resulted in 98% *Microcystis* cell removal in the presence of other algae (Gregory and Zabel, 1990). DAF also resulted in 40% to 80% removal of *Microcystis*, 90% to 100 % removal of *Anabaena*, and 30% removal of *Planktothrix* (Steffensen and Nicholson, 1994). Many additional similar results with DAF have been reported (Markham *et al.*, 1997) (Bernhardt and Clasen, 1991) (Vlaski *et al.*, 1997). However, DAF performed poorly during high turbidity periods (Mouchet and Bonn elye, 1998).

Powdered Activated Carbon (PAC)

There is general agreement that to achieve high removal efficiencies, very high doses of PAC are required for toxin removal and that contact time is very important. A dose of 20 mg/L of PAC was able to achieve 90% removal of hepatotoxins following conventional treatment combined with pre-ozonation (Keijola *et al.*, 1988). The most effective PAC tested (wood based) of several types, required doses greater than 20 mg /L to achieve toxin removal of greater than 85% (Hart and Stott, 1993) (Croll and Hart, 1996). For Microcystin-LR at an initial concentration of 50 µg/L, a dose of 25 mg/L with 30 minutes contact time was able to achieve 98% removal with one PAC, while a dose of 50 mg/L only achieved a 60 per cent removal with another. The mesopore volume of the various carbons was the best predictor of

carbon performance (Donati *et al.*, 1994a). *Nodularin* was also removed with PAC (Donati *et al.*, 1994b). A dose of 12 mg/l of PAC achieved 95% removal of dissolved microcystin-LR from an initial concentration of 50 µg/L (Bernazeau, 1994). Alum coagulation in conjunction with PAC was found to affect adversely toxin removal (Jones *et al.*, 1993).

Rapid Sand Filtration

Rapid sand filtration achieved 14-30% removal of *Microcystis aeruginosa* cells (Drikas *et al.*, 1997). Another study showed 14% removal of cyanobacterial cells in rapid sand filtration (Lepisto *et al.*, 1996). A third study demonstrated 42% removal of cyanobacteria cells in rapid sand filtration using GAC media (Lambert *et al.*, 1996). Researchers have expressed concerns over cell lysis and toxin release during filtration (Mouchet and Bonn elye, 1998).

Slow Sand Filtration

One evaluation demonstrated 99% removal of algal cells by slow sand filtration (Mouchet and Bonn elye, 1998). Other studies of slow sand filtration reported over 80 % removal of toxins from *Microcystis*, 30-65% removal of toxins from *Planktothrix* and approximately 70 % removal of *anatoxin-a* (Keijola *et al.*, 1988). The use of roughing filters followed by slow sand filters showed that *M. aeruginosa* and some *Planktothrix* cells could be removed by physical means and biological processes (Sherman *et al.*, 1995).

Granular Activated Carbon

Granular activated carbon is effective for removal of toxins, provided the adsorption capacity of the GAC has not been compromised. Pilot scale tests treating microcystins at 30-50 µg/L with 5-6.5 mg/L DOC showed greater than 90% toxin removal for water treatment volumes up to 7,000-10,000 activated carbon bed volumes before efficiency dropped (Bernezeau, 1994). Microcystin concentrations of 5-20 µg/L for EBCTs of 10-15 minutes, resulted in a bed-life of only 30-45 days (Hart and Stott, 1993). A full-scale GAC adsorber achieved 40 and 60 % microcystin removal down to 0.6-1.2 µg/L for raw water DOC levels of 20 mg/L, (Lambert *et al.*, 1996).

Biological Filtration

Microcystin-LR has been shown to be biodegradable (Fawell *et al.*, 1993). Pilot scale tests using two GACs, one previously used and one unused GAC with contact times of 7.5 and 15 minutes showed no significant difference between the performance of the unused GAC and the used GAC at both contact times (Carlile, 1994) with greater than 90% removal over 11 weeks.

Membrane Filtration

Flat-sheet studies of UF and MF membranes, in both dead-end and crossflow modes, have shown high efficiency of removal (> 98 per cent) of whole cells of toxic *M. aeruginosa* with minimal cell damage (Chow *et al.*, 1997b). Nanofiltration removed microcystin spiked at concentrations of 5 and 30 µg/L resulted in removal to below 1 µg/L (Hart and Stott, 1993). Reverse osmosis membranes at 25- 35 bar eliminated 96.7% and 99.6% of microcystin-LR and microcystin-RR from tap and salt water. (Neumann and Weckesser, 1998). Toxin passage through RO membranes was higher with waters with high levels of natural organic matter (WaterRF, 2010).

Conclusion

Water treatment plant operators and engineers should be aware of the potential for water treatment processes to lyse algal cells, release algal toxins, remove algal cells, and destroy algal toxins and taste and odor causing compounds.

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