

Seaweed invasion along Ewa Beach making people ill

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What to do

It sounds like a B-movie: Attack of the Toxic Algae.

But it's a true-life story. More than a dozen people in Ewa Beach have complained of eye, nose and throat irritation over the last few days — caused by minute seaweed fragments carried through the air by sea spray from the high surf.

The unstable weather system that drenched parts of Leeward Oahu and Kauai yesterday also formed the right circumstances for the toxic algae, according to a state health official.

The Ewa cases haven't been too severe, only respiratory irritation and rashes, but health officials are concerned that problems could continue through the end of the week if current weather and wave conditions persist.

Bruce Anderson, deputy director for environmental health, said the airborne algae, *Microcoleus lyngbyaceus*, is a fine, hair-like seaweed that can cause burning eyes, itchy throats, bloody noses and blisters. It lingers innocuously offshore year round, but becomes hazardous when large surf brings it ashore, mostly during the summer.

"The toxin is produced when the algae is broken up, and of course, then it may wash into shore," Anderson said.

Most people suffer irritation when they come into contact with the algae, either by swim-

ming or being near sea spray, but there are no lasting effects, he said. The most severe symptom — blisters — only last for a few days and should be seen by a doctor. Anderson said people should stay away from sea spray and out of the water at Ewa Beach while the surf remains large.

The National Weather Service expects the surf to be in the 2- to 4-foot range today. Yesterday morning, the waves got up to 7 to 8 feet at Diamond Head and Ala Moana, but decreased to about 3 to 5 feet by the afternoon. Forecaster Tim Craig said he expected the high-surf advisory for all south-facing shores would be canceled today.

"It has come down a bit as we were anticipating," Craig said last night.

Unlike the big waves, the sporadic downpours and heavy humidity — unusual for this time of year — are expected to continue. An unstable air mass over Kauai and Oahu may sit over the islands at least through tomorrow, when the trade winds are expected to return, said forecaster Hans Rosendal.