

Columnaris Disease

One common cause of fish deaths is Columnaris disease. The disease is caused by a bacterium called *Chondrococcus columnaris*. The bacterium is always present in fish populations but seems to affect fish in spring when most of the die-offs occur. It is in spring when water temperatures are warming and fish are undergoing some stress due to spawning. Sometimes, thousands of fish are observed dead or weakly swimming along shores that are windswept. Species affected are usually sunfish, crappies and bullheads and occasionally, largemouth bass and northern pike.

When a die-off occurs it is usually a small percentage of the populations that are affected and fishing success is not influenced. Symptoms of Columnaris disease are discolored patches on the body, sloughing of scales, eroded gill filaments and high mortality.

It is recommended that fish dead or dying due to Columnaris disease not be consumed. However, any gamefish caught which are normal in appearance and behavior from the same lake may be consumed. There is no practical cure for Columnaris disease as it occurs in the wild.

Fish kills due to Columnaris can be quite widespread in this area. Usually kills on a dozen or so lakes are significant enough so as to be reported by the public each year. During the hot, droughty years of 1987-88, Columnaris disease killed fish on virtually every lake in the management area.

Sometimes when fish kills happen people are quite concerned that something may be poisoning the environment. Columnaris disease is generally not a result of man's activities on the environment. We do appreciate it when the public reports fish kills and we will conduct an investigation if that appears warranted. The DNR biology laboratory in St. Paul has a limited ability to receive specimens delivered from our office or the general public.

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