



Koi Herpes Virus

Frequently Asked Questions

Late Summer 2014

Q: What's causing the carp to die in the Rock River, its tributaries including Silver Creek and lakes Sinissippi and Koshkonong?

A: Results from genetic tests indicate the die-offs are the result of koi herpes virus, a virus that is new to Wisconsin waters and affects common carp and ornamental fish known as koi. The virus suppresses the fish's immune system, making it vulnerable to common infections. In the Rock River, common carp are dying from a co-infection of koi herpes virus and a bacterial infection that causes columnaris disease. The bacteria are common and naturally present in surface water.

Q: Is koi herpes virus or the columnaris infection harmful to humans or other fish?

A: Koi herpes virus and the columnaris infection causing the fish kill are not harmful to people. However, columnaris bacteria can kill other fish in a weakened condition. Care should be taken in removing dead or dying carp because they also may contain other potentially harmful bacteria that multiply in warm weather conditions. Health and safety experts recommend the use of gloves to handle any dead or dying fish.

Q: When will the die-off end?

A: Koi herpes virus is most active when water temperatures are between 71-79 °F. The number of fish affected likely will decline as fall approaches and cooler nights bring the water temperatures down. However, carp may carry the koi herpes virus and continue to spread it without showing symptoms. DNR fish biologists anticipate the virus may reappear as waters warm next year.

Q: What is DNR doing to help?

A: DNR fish biologists are monitoring the fish kills to determine where the virus is present and whether it is spreading. DNR researchers also will be conducting follow-up studies to understand the effects of the die-off on the sport fishery in the affected waters.

Q: Are you saying the carp die-off may be a good thing?

A: Common carp are an invasive species and their presence has altered the environment in many Wisconsin waterways. It is too soon to say whether a large scale die-off might allow for the return of conditions that favor naturally occurring game fish.

Q: In the meantime, what should property owners do about the dead fish? Will DNR pay for removal?

A: DNR encourages property owners to remove the fish, which can be buried, placed in landfills or used in farm fields as fertilizer. Naturally occurring fish kills are the responsibility of property owners and in some communities, lake or neighborhood associations may take the lead in securing a single contractor to handle the removal.

Q: Is it safe for humans and pets to swim in waters affected with koi herpes virus?

A: The koi herpes virus and bacteria commonly associated with carp are not known or likely to be pathogenic in humans or pets. The DNR asks the public to exercise good judgment in deciding to participate in recreational water activities in areas where dead fish have accumulated. It is reasonable to suggest that the public avoid direct skin contact with dead or dying carp and it is never a good idea to swim or wade among large numbers of dead fish, particularly in stagnant areas of water. As a precaution, people who handle dying or dead fish or swim and wade in the water should wash thoroughly with soap and clean water. Pets should be rinsed thoroughly with fresh water after swimming. These precautions should be followed at all times, not only in the presence of a fish kill situation.

Q: Is there treatment for koi herpes virus?

A: There is no treatment for koi herpes virus. Antiviral drugs are not available to treat koi herpesvirus or any other viral diseases of wild fish.

Q: Is there anything citizens can do to help?

A: Citizens who observe dead or dying carp are asked to contact Laura Stremick-Thompson, a DNR fish biologist, by email via Laura.Stremickthompson@wisconsin.gov, or by phone at 920-387-7876. Koi herpes virus is a federally reportable disease and DNR officials have completed the initial notification. However, DNR welcomes citizen surveillance in identifying additional die-offs.

Q: Can I eat the fish I catch from the Rock River, Lake Sinissippi, Lake Koshkonong and tributaries to the Rock River including Silver Creek?

A: Yes. Anglers can continue to enjoy fishing and eating their catch. Koi herpes virus does not affect humans. Fish can be infected, carry and shed koi herpes virus without showing signs of disease. Such fish are safe to eat as long as the fish are fresh, properly handled and cooked. Never eat fish you find dead, decomposing or that appear sick, regardless of cause.

Areas affected by koi herpes virus

