

Mission:

To protect, promote & improve the health of all people in Florida through integrated state, county & community efforts.



Ron DeSantis
Governor

Joseph A. Ladapo, MD, PhD
State Surgeon General

Vision: To be the **Healthiest State** in the Nation

SARGASSUM

Sargassum is a type of brown seaweed that is washing up on beaches in Florida. As it rots, it gives off a substance called hydrogen sulfide. Hydrogen sulfide has a very unpleasant odor, like rotten eggs. Although the seaweed itself cannot harm your health, tiny sea creatures that live in *Sargassum* can cause skin rashes and blisters.

Learn more about *Sargassum*—what it is, how it can harm your health, and how to protect yourself and your family from possible health effects.

What is *Sargassum*

Sargassum is a brown seaweed that floats in the ocean and is washing up on Florida beaches in large amounts.

It provides an important habitat for migratory organisms that have adapted specifically to this floating algae including crab, shrimp, sea turtles, and commercially important fish species such as tuna and marlin.

Why is *Sargassum* a concern?

- ❖ The tiny sea creatures that live in *Sargassum* can irritate skin with direct contact.
- ❖ Decomposing *Sargassum* causes an unpleasant smell.
- ❖ People who live and work near the beach are concerned that *Sargassum* washing up along the beaches may harm their health.

Why does *Sargassum* smell so bad?

When washed ashore, *Sargassum* will decompose (rot). Rotting *Sargassum* causes the production of hydrogen sulfide gas which smells like rotten eggs.

How can hydrogen sulfide affect my health?

Hydrogen sulfide can irritate the eyes, nose, and throat. If you have asthma or other breathing illnesses, you will be more sensitive to hydrogen sulfide. You may have trouble breathing after you inhale it.

Does *Sargassum* cause skin rashes and blisters?

Sargassum does not sting or cause rashes. However, tiny organisms that live in *Sargassum* (like larvae of jellyfish) may irritate skin if they come in contact with it.

Will hydrogen sulfide from rotting *Sargassum* cause cancer or other long-term health effects?

Hydrogen sulfide is not known to cause cancer in humans. If you are exposed to hydrogen sulfide for a long time in an enclosed space with little air flow (like some work exposures), it can affect your health. However, hydrogen sulfide levels in an area like the beach, where large amounts of air flow can dilute levels, is not expected to harm health.

Can I use *Sargassum* in cooking?

You should not use *Sargassum* in cooking because it may contain large amounts of heavy metals like arsenic and cadmium.

How can I protect myself and my family from exposure to *Sargassum*?

- ✓ Always supervise children at the beach.
- ✓ Avoid touching or swimming near seaweed to avoid stinging by organisms that live in it.
- ✓ Use gloves if you must handle seaweed.
- ✓ Stay away from the beach if you experience irritation or breathing problems from hydrogen sulfide—at least until symptoms go away.
- ✓ Close windows and doors if you live near the beach.
- ✓ Avoid or limit your time on the beach if you have asthma or other respiratory problems.

Learn more about *Sargassum*

- ❖ *Sargassum* provides an important habitat for migratory organisms including crabs, shrimp, sea turtles, and commercially caught fish, such as tuna and marlin.
- ❖ *Sargassum* is common in the Sargasso Sea. The Sargasso Sea is a region of the North Atlantic Ocean. It is surrounded by four currents, but no land.
- ❖ Currently, Florida has no regulatory guidelines for exposure to hydrogen sulfide at the beach.
- ❖ Odors from most substances in outdoor air are not at levels that can harm your health. In enclosed spaces, gases may accumulate and can cause harm.
- ❖ If workers are collecting and transporting *Sargassum*, they should wear protective clothing, such as gloves, boots, and gas filter half masks.

For more information about beach safety, see [Keep it safe and healthy at the beach, lake, river, or spring.](#)

For more information about hydrogen sulfide, see [Hydrogen Sulfide: Frequently Asked Questions.](#)

References:

Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) (2016). Hydrogen sulfide ToxFAQs™. <https://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/toxfaqs/tfacts114.pdf>

Doyle, E. & Franks, J. (2015). *Sargassum* Fact Sheet. Gulf and Caribbean Fisheries Institute. <https://www.gcfi.org/sargassum-influx/> (Available in English, Spanish and French)

Franks, J. S., Johnson, D. R., Ko, D., Sanchez-Rubio, G., Hendon, J. R. & Lay, M. (2011). Unprecedented Influx of Pelagic *Sargassum* along Caribbean Island Coastlines during Summer 2011. Proceedings of the 64th Gulf and Caribbean Fisheries Institute, Oct 31 - Nov 5, 2011. Puerto Morelos, Mexico.

Franks, J. S., Johnson, D. R. and Ko, D. S. (2016). Pelagic *Sargassum* in the tropical north Atlantic. *Gulf and Caribbean Research*, Vol 27, SC6-11. <https://aquila.usm.edu/gcr/vol27/iss1/8/>

This publication was made possible by Grant Number 6 NU61TS000287-03-1 from the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry. Its contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, or the Department of Health and Human Services.

If you have questions or comments about this factsheet, we encourage you to contact us.

Please write to: Division of Disease Control and Health Protection
Bureau of Environmental Health, Public Health Toxicology
Florida Department Health
4052 Bald Cypress Way, Bin # A-08
Tallahassee, FL 32399
phtoxicology@flhealth.gov

Or call us at: Toll free at 877-798-2772