



News Release

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Raw oyster consumption: state health officials see rise in related illnesses

Recent cases highlight need for awareness and prevention

OLYMPIA — More than 40 people across the state have gotten sick with vibriosis so far this year, mostly due to eating raw or undercooked oysters. State health officials expect the number of illnesses to rise in the next few weeks due to projected warm temperatures and midday low tides. The Department of Health recommends cooking all shellfish in the summer months to kill the *Vibrio* bacteria, making them safe to eat.

“We’ve had a warm summer, which increases the risk that eating raw oysters might make people sick,” said Jerrod Davis, director of the Office of Shellfish and Water Protection. “It’s much safer to eat cooked oysters, especially this time of year.”

Vibrio parahaemolyticus bacteria are found naturally in the environment; they thrive in warm temperatures. When midday low tides coincide with warm weather, the bacteria can grow quickly, raising the risk of vibriosis illness among people who eat raw or undercooked oysters.

Vibriosis typically causes watery diarrhea, often along with nausea, stomach cramps, headache, vomiting, fever, and chills. Symptoms generally appear within 12 to 24 hours after eating infected shellfish. Vibriosis is often mild to moderate, with symptoms lasting from two to five days. It can be life threatening to people with weak immune systems or chronic liver disease. People who take antacids can also get extremely ill. People in these risk groups should avoid eating raw or undercooked shellfish.

Recreational harvesters should take extra precautions when gathering oysters in the summer. Oysters should be put on ice or refrigerated as soon as possible after being collected. Shellfish should be harvested as soon as the tide recedes, avoiding oysters that may have been exposed for unknown periods of time. Once collected, oysters should be cooked at 145° F for 15 seconds to destroy *Vibrio* bacteria. Don’t rinse fully-cooked oysters with seawater; it can contaminate them.

Vibriosis illnesses on the rise

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The Department of Health has been sending notices to shellfish growers recommending extra precautions during periods of low midday tides and warm weather, and weekly lab test results showing the levels of *Vibrio* bacteria in growing areas. A weekly report summarizing illnesses is also sent, allowing growers to make informed decisions about when and where to harvest safely.

Public health officials recently finalized a list of “best management practices” to help shellfish businesses operate using the best methods known for ensuring healthy shellfish harvesting.

Shellfish harvesting businesses have special control measures in place during the summer months to keep people who choose to eat raw oysters from getting sick. When these measures are not enough to prevent illnesses, commercial harvest areas undergo more stringent measures or are closed. The Department of Health closes commercial growing areas when *Vibrio* levels are high, or when there are four confirmed vibriosis illnesses within a 30-day period linked to commercially harvested oysters. Currently, Hammersley Inlet and several parts of Hood Canal, including Dabob Bay and Quilcene Bay, are closed due to high *Vibrio* levels. Oakland Bay and Totten Inlet growing areas are also closed due to recent illnesses.

Before heading to the beach, people who gather their own shellfish should always check our [shellfish safety website](#) to find out if there are any health advisories or closures in effect for vibrio, pollution, biotoxins, or other health risks.

[Current shellfish safety information](#) is available on the agency’s Office of Shellfish and Water Protection website and from our toll-free hotline, 1-800-562-5632.

The [Department of Health website](#) (www.doh.wa.gov) is your source for *a healthy dose of information*. Also, [find us on Facebook](#) and [follow us on Twitter](#).

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