



SEASONAL HEALTH ALERT

Shellfish Poisoning

Issued: June 2021

Contact WAPC at mryuk@wapc.org with questions

Algae are often found along Washington’s coasts, and typically do not harm our health. They can become a problem, however, when certain biotoxin-producing types “bloom” (i.e., rapidly reproduce)—a common occurrence in the warmer, sunny months of summer.

The most common way people become sick from biotoxin-producing algae is when they eat shellfish that have been contaminated by the toxins. Shellfish are filter feeders, meaning they eat algae and other particles in their surrounding water. When shellfish eat biotoxin-producing algae, the toxins accumulate in their tissues. The more harmful algae the shellfish eat (such as during a bloom), the more toxin they accumulate.

If you plan to harvest shellfish, be sure to check if there are unsafe levels of biotoxins before you dig:

- Beaches sometimes post warning signs. If you see a warning sign, that means it is **not safe to harvest shellfish from that beach**.
- View where it is safe to harvest on the Department of Health Shellfish Safety Map: <https://fortress.wa.gov/doh/biotoxin/biotoxin.html>. Check the map right before you go, to ensure you are up to date on closed areas.
- Harmful blooms are not always visible—the presence of ‘red tides’ or dirty water are not necessarily indicators of harmful algae. Conversely, toxins may be present in clear water. Checking the Safety Map is the only way to know.



It’s also important to **know your shellfish**:

- Mussels accumulate algae biotoxins more quickly than other types of shellfish.
- Varnish clams tend to accumulate higher toxin levels than other shellfish.
- Butter clams and varnish clams can remain harmful long after other species return to safe levels.
- Neither cooking nor freezing reliably destroys toxins in shellfish.
- Shellfish contaminated with biotoxins do not look or taste different from shellfish that are safe to eat.

Types of poisoning from eating contaminated shellfish:

- **DIARRHETIC SHELLFISH POISONING (DSP):** Symptoms include profuse diarrhea, along with nausea, vomiting, and abdominal pain.
- **AMNESIC SHELLFISH POISONING (ASP):** Symptoms begin with nausea, vomiting, diarrhea; severe cases progress to confusion, headache, and short-term memory loss.
- **PARALYTIC SHELLFISH POISONING (PSP):** Symptoms include numbness and tingling of the face and extremities, dizziness, muscle weakness, and difficulty with vision or balance. If enough toxin is eaten, the muscles used for breathing can become paralyzed, which can be fatal.
- If you suspect shellfish poisoning, **call the Washington Poison Center** at 1-800-222-1222. If someone has lost consciousness or is not breathing, **call 911**.

Other illnesses from shellfish:

- **VIBRIOSIS:** caused by increased levels of vibrio bacteria in warm conditions. Symptoms include severe diarrhea, nausea, vomiting, and abdominal cramping. Symptoms may appear up to 4 days following ingestion. Severe cases may require hospitalization. Most cases occur from eating raw or undercooked shellfish—always cook shellfish to an internal temperature of 145°F for 15 seconds.
- **NOROVIRUS:** enters the water from untreated sewage. It is most often transmitted from eating raw or undercooked shellfish. Symptoms include severe diarrhea, nausea, vomiting, and abdominal cramping. Severe cases may require hospitalization.