

Seasonal Health Alert: Shellfish Poisoning

Shellfish are filter feeders, meaning they eat algae and other particles from the surrounding water. In warm, sunny months, toxin-producing algae can rapidly reproduce (called a “bloom”). When shellfish consume these algae, toxins accumulate in their tissues. The more algae they consume, the more toxins they accumulate.

Before harvesting shellfish:

- Check for warning signs at the beach and follow their instructions.
- Warning signs are not guaranteed. Always check the **Washington State Department of Health’s Shellfish Safety Map** for up-to-date closure information (<https://fortress.wa.gov/doh/biotoxin/biotoxin.html>).
- Harmful blooms are not always visible—clear water may still contain toxins. The Safety Map is your best source.

Know your shellfish:

- Mussels accumulate toxins faster than other types of shellfish.
- Varnish clams tend to accumulate higher toxin levels.
- Butter and varnish clams can remain unsafe for a long time after other species return to safe levels.
- Cooking or freezing does **not** destroy toxins.
- Contaminated shellfish look and taste normal.



Types & symptoms of shellfish poisoning:

- **Diarrhetic shellfish poisoning (DSP):** Diarrhea, nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain.
- **Amnesic shellfish poisoning (ASP):** Starts with nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea; severe cases involve confusion, headache, and short-term memory loss.
- **Paralytic shellfish poisoning (PSP):** Numbness, tingling, dizziness, muscle weakness, and vision/balance issues. Severe cases can paralyze breathing muscles and be fatal.

If you suspect shellfish poisoning, call 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 *Vibrio* bacteria in warm water. Symptoms: severe diarrhea, nausea, vomiting, cramping. Symptoms may appear up to 4 days following ingestion. Severe cases may need 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 water from untreated sewage. Often spread by eating raw or undercooked shellfish. Symptoms: severe diarrhea, nausea, vomiting, cramping. Severe cases may require hospitalization.