

Shellfish Contamination

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What is shellfish food poisoning?

Oysters, mussels, pipis and cockles are often referred to as bivalve molluscs or *shellfish*. They feed by filtering the water they inhabit and eating the substances the water contains. If the water or the substances consumed contain toxins, these can accumulate in the shellfish which, when eaten, can cause food poisoning.

There are four types of food poisonings caused by eating contaminated shellfish: paralytic shellfish poisoning (PSP), neurotoxic shellfish poisoning (NSP), amnesic shellfish poisoning (ASP) and diarrhoeic shellfish poisoning (DSP).

Paralytic Shellfish Poisoning (PSP)

PSP is the most widespread worldwide. Symptoms can appear five minutes to 10 hours after eating contaminated shellfish, starting with tingling or numbness of the face, arms and legs, followed by headaches, dizziness, nausea and muscular incoordination. In cases of severe poisoning, muscle paralysis and respiratory failure occur and death may follow in two to 25 hours.

Neurotoxic shellfish poisoning (NSP)

NSP symptoms can occur within a few minutes to a few hours after eating contaminated shellfish and include numbness, tingling in the mouth, arms and legs, incoordination, stomach upset and severe muscle aches. There are no recorded fatalities due to NSP and recovery normally occurs in two to three days.

Amnesic shellfish poisoning (ASP)

ASP symptoms occur within 24 hours after eating contaminated shellfish and include nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea. Neurological symptoms such as dizziness, headache, disorientation and possible permanent short term memory loss usually occur 48 hours after consumption. In severe cases, seizures, paralysis and death may occur.

Diarrhoeic shellfish poisoning (DSP)

DSP symptoms occur 30 minutes to three hours after eating contaminated shellfish and include vomiting and diarrhoea for two to three days. This disease is not generally life threatening and patients recover with no after effects.

Avoiding food poisoning from shellfish

The NSW Food Authority recommends eating only shellfish and seafood harvested commercially. NSW seafood businesses operate under a recognised food safety program with strict food safety controls.

If you do collect shellfish for eating, never do it after rainfall, from water affected by algae blooms, or from an area closed by NSW Fisheries.

If you think a food product has made you, or someone you know, sick, seek medical help immediately. You can also report the matter to the NSW Food Authority Contact Centre.