

# Seasonal Health Alert: Shellfish Poisoning

Shellfish are filter feeders, meaning they eat algae and other particles in their surrounding water. In warmer, sunny months, certain toxin-producing types of algae rapidly reproduce (called a “bloom”). When shellfish eat these algae, the toxins accumulate in their tissues. The more algae the shellfish eat (such as during a bloom), the more toxins they accumulate.

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

- Beaches sometimes post warning signs. If you see a warning sign, 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 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 toxic 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 toxins more quickly than other types of shellfish.
- Varnish clams tend to accumulate higher toxin levels than other shellfish.
- Butter 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 diarrhea, nausea, vomiting, and abdominal pain.
- **Amnesic shellfish poisoning (ASP):** Symptoms begin with nausea, vomiting, and 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.