

Safe shellfish gathering and consumption – what you need to know

Shellfish are a risk food for causing diarrhoea and vomiting illnesses. This risk is higher still when shellfish are collected from near urban areas and from harbours close to pastoral farms, particularly dairy farms. A recent study completed in the Western Bay of Plenty confirms that bacteria and virus levels in local shellfish frequently reach unsafe levels.

What's a public health warning?

A public health warning is issued to advise the public that a recreational shellfish gathering area is contaminated and is therefore more likely to cause illness. It is not a ban; a warning is made so people can make their own decisions. Health warnings are issued by the Medical Officer of Health employed by Toi Te Ora – Public Health.

Why is a public health warning issued?

Disease-causing bugs (called pathogens) can survive for weeks and sometimes months in the marine or freshwater environment. Due to the way shellfish filter their food from water, the contaminants concentrate in the gut of the shellfish. Anyone eating shellfish collected from contaminated water is exposed to these bugs and risk getting sick.

Will I get sick if I eat shellfish from contaminated recreational water?

You may suffer 'tummy bug' symptoms (diarrhoea and sometimes vomiting) from bugs such as E.coli, Salmonella, Campylobacter, and viruses such as norovirus.

What types of shellfish are affected?

Bivalve shellfish (with two shells) such as mussels, tuatua, toheroa, oysters, cockles, pipi and scallops filter food particles from the seawater, and store bacteria, viruses, contaminants and pollution in their gut tissue. Discarding the gut (hua) from shellfish before eating them reduces the risk. Grazing shellfish, such as paua, kina and pupu (catseyes) pose a lower risk.

Is shellfish safe to collect after rainfall?

Do not collect shellfish after heavy rain as storms may flush sewage overflow or farm run-off downstream which contaminates the water. After the water has run clear for a few days, shellfish should be safe to collect again.

Is there a safe place to collect shellfish?

NZ Food Safety Authority advises that consuming any shellfish collected from water near urban areas is risky. Generally shellfish collected from open coastal areas are safer for consumption but should be handled and cooked according to NZSFA advice.

Where can I find more information on gathering shellfish safely?

NZFSA information can be found in council offices and libraries, and on their website at <http://www.nzfsa.govt.nz/consumers/hunting-collecting-fishing/seafood-gatherers/index.htm?print>

Does cooking the shellfish kill the bugs?

Light steaming or cooking does not destroy all viruses and toxins. Boiling for at least three minutes is the only cooking method proven to kill most of the bugs.

What happens when routine sampling finds high levels of bugs in the water?

When a contamination event occurs the Medical Officer of Health is advised. Together with the relevant council, the Medical Officer of Health assesses the risk to public health and what actions to take.

How does recreational water get polluted/contaminated?

Faecal contamination can enter our waterways through storm water and rural run-off, leaky sewer pipes, seepage from septic tanks and inadequately treated sewage discharges.

During or shortly after rainfall human and animal faecal bacteria and other bugs, can enter our waterways through urban and rural stormwater runoff. There is also an increased risk of faecal contamination where there are stock crossings or free access by stock to a waterway.

Once a water quality issue has been identified, the district council with responsibility for the area investigates the source of the contamination. Many catchments have multiple faecal sources so identifying a particular source responsible for a contamination event can be difficult.

How long is the shellfish unsafe, after faecal contamination occurs?

Shellfish within 50m of the faecal entry point can remain infected and unsafe for up to three months. Shellfish further away from this point can take up to a month to return to safe levels.

How do I find out if there is a public health warning in place?

Once a public health warning has been issued, local media release is advised by Toi Te Ora – Public Health, warning signs are erected by the district or city councils and local users, such as sporting or community groups are advised.

Go to www.bopdhb.govt.nz for current health warnings and for information about why the warning is in place, contact the local council.

What about areas that don't have warning signs?

Areas without warning signs are not always safe for gathering shellfish. You should avoid collecting and eating shellfish from areas where:

- Pipes or culverts run down to the beach
- Sewage or stormwater is discharged, or there are lots of houses nearby (especially if they are on septic tank sewage systems)
- Farm animals are grazing nearby
- There may be industrial pollution
- Boats may discharge sewage, eg near wharves or marinas, or the water may be contaminated from antifouling paint or diesel.