



Public Health Information Sheet

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303-969-2922

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505-988-6040

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Islands/Alaska
510-817-1375
206-220-4270

Web Resources

NPS Public Health:
http://www.nps.gov/public_health/

CDC:
<http://www.cdc.gov>

State and Local Health Departments:
<http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/international/relres.html>

Vibrio vulnificus

Vibrio vulnificus is a bacterium that is naturally present in virtually all coastal waters of the United States and can also be found in brackish inland lakes. The organism can cause illness in individuals who eat contaminated seafood (particularly oysters) or have an open wound that is exposed to marine waters. An average of 50 confirmed cases, 45 serious illnesses, and 16 deaths are reported each year from the Gulf Coast states. Illnesses have also been reported along both the Pacific and Atlantic coasts, and cases have been associated with brackish inland lakes of New Mexico and Oklahoma. Most infections occur in the warm months between May and October.

Illness caused by *V. vulnificus* is relatively rare and most healthy persons do not become ill when the organism is ingested. In persons with weakened immune systems, especially those with chronic liver disease, exposure can cause an infection of the bloodstream (septicemia) resulting in serious illness and death. Infection of the bloodstream is characterized by fever, chills, decreased blood pressure, and blistering skin lesions. Ingestion of the bacterium by healthy individuals can cause gastroenteritis which is an inflammation of the stomach that commonly results in vomiting and diarrhea. Persons affected by gastroenteritis may also have headache, fever and abdominal cramps.

Healthy individuals can get *V. vulnificus* infections in open wounds that come in contact with marine waters. Initial symptoms can include redness, pain or swelling around the cut that that can spread quickly, and open wounds that becomes larger and deeper. The organism can infect the blood or cause serious skin infections.



Persons having any of the symptoms described above should contact their doctor immediately. *V. vulnificus* infection can be treated with antibiotics.

Recommendations for reducing risk:

- 1) Do not expose open wounds or cuts to warm seawater. When swimming or wading, the wound should be covered with a watertight wrap.
- 2) Cook shellfish thoroughly. Individuals in the high risk category should not consume raw oysters or other shellfish.
- 3) Wear gloves when handling raw shellfish and avoid cross-contamination of raw shellfish with other foods.

References:

Health Information, National Center for Infectious Diseases, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Department of Health and Human Services.

(<http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/index.htm>)

Bad Bug Book, U.S. Food and Drug Administration, Department of Health and Human Services

(<http://www.cfsan.fda.gov/~mow/intro.html>)

If you have any questions, please contact you Regional Public Health Consultant, park sanitarian or call WASO Public Health. Also see the NPS Public Health website for more information on other public health concerns. (http://www.nps.gov/public_health/)

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