**Paralytic Shellfish Poisoning (PSP)**

**Disease Name:** Paralytic shellfish poisoning syndrome

**Organism:** Saxitoxins produced by *Alexandrium* species and other dinoflagellates present in shellfish especially during algal blooms known as red tides; however, may occur without red tides.

**Incubation period:** 5 min-12 hours after consumption of shellfish.

**Infectious period:** No secondary transmission documented.

**Transmission routes:** Foodborne. In Alaska, all documented cases associated with consumption of cockles, clams, mussels, and crab (toxin found in crab viscera).

**Treatment for patient:** There is no antidote for the toxin. Individuals who experience the first symptoms of PSP should seek immediate medical attention. In severe cases, dyspnea, dysphagia, muscle weakness or frank paralysis, ataxia and respiratory insufficiency may occur. Symptomatic treatment, including ventilatory support, is crucial for successful outcomes. Recovery is usually complete, symptoms usually resolve within hours to days after shellfish ingestion.

**Information Needed for the Investigation**

**Verify the Diagnosis**
- Interview ill person or others who shared meal for symptoms: paresthesias (mouth, lips, face, extremities), nausea, vomiting, floating sensation.
- Symptoms, coupled with history of eating shellfish from Alaska beaches equals probable PSP, a public health emergency.

**Determine the Extent of Illness**
- Obtain list of persons who shared meal from ill patient if possible. Contact local health care provider, PHN, or family member.
- Interview all who shared meal for symptoms, using PSP interview form.

**Laboratory Specimens**

**Patient**
- Obtain 25 ml urine within 7 days of consumption of suspect food; ideally as soon as possible. Urine should be labeled with the patient name, DOB, the date and time collected. **Freeze urine until it can be shipped to ASPHL.** Include an ASPHL lab slip with “PSP testing” and date collected written on the upper right-hand corner of the lab slip (see example; form available on-line: 11/15/2013)
Shipping to CDC:
- Send official Epi email (from Joe or Michael) to CDC (contacts below) to request saxitoxin testing.
- Have the packing and shipping person at ASPHL (Rick Shea 334-2158) work with the referring lab and then CDC lab to send specimens.

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Other CDC contact: Rudolph Johnson
Cell: 678-983-8311
Email: rmj6@cdc.gov

Food
- Obtain suspect shellfish or crabs. Contact DEC, PHN, CHAs or family and ask to save suspect food in refrigerator until notified by state for further instructions.
- Notify DEC Environmental Health Officer who will usually work with you to obtain package, and send food to DEC Environmental Health Lab (EHL) for testing.
- Notify EHL (main number 375-8200 or Matt Forester 375-8204) regarding anticipated delivery of shellfish specimens. Environmental Health Officer may do this.

Protocol for specimen collection:
- Collect portions of the meal (15 animals is an adequate number for testing) and store it in a Ziploc® freezer bag.
- If the shellfish is still in the shell and can be sent immediately to EHL, refrigerate, do not freeze.
- If any delay is anticipated, freeze the samples.
- Animals are the preferred specimen. If broth is the only specimen that is available, this may be collected and sent for testing, but will likely have a lower yield for saxitoxin detection.

Fill out Marine Toxins Form: [http://dec.alaska.gov/eh/docs/lab/Forms/Shelfish&SeafoodSubmission.pdf](http://dec.alaska.gov/eh/docs/lab/Forms/Shelfish&SeafoodSubmission.pdf). Document the date, time, and exact location where the shellfish were collected. Don’t worry about the commercial info such as permit #, expected sales etc.; just give as much other information as possible (date/time/type of shellfish (butter clam, cockle, etc).

Note: Gastric contents are acceptable for saxitoxin testing at the Environmental Health Lab (EHL) only if the gastric contents contain whole animals.

11/15/2013
Contact and Control Measures

- Identify and evaluate all who shared suspect meal. Anyone with symptoms should be advised to seek medical care immediately.
- Advise all involved not to eat any of suspect food nor food collected from same area.
- Notify DEC Seafood (George Scanlan, 269-7638), DEC Food Safety program Mgr (Kim Stryker 269-7583) and HSS PIO (Greg Wilkinson, 269-7285) to discuss issuance of PSP alert press release. They will want to know the beach area name and number of cases.

Important Information

- PSP is a public health emergency. The goal is to identify others at risk and evaluate for symptoms of PSP. Notify the regional PHN of a possible outbreak.
- Shellfish sold commercially are routinely tested and safe for consumption. PSP occurs widely in Alaska in connection with ingestion of non-commercial shellfish. Recreational beaches are not considered safe for shellfish gathering and consumption.

Reporting Requirements

- FTR: write up all confirmed and probable cases.
- Write up case summary and file for all suspected negative cases.
- AK-STARS: enter all suspected, probable and confirmed cases.
- Track saxitoxin results (with patient name) and give to Sharon Tiplady. Sharon will scan these documents to append to the patient name in AK-STARS

References


Section of Epidemiology PSP website: [http://www.epi.alaska.gov/id/dod/psp/default.htm](http://www.epi.alaska.gov/id/dod/psp/default.htm)

DEC Shellfish website: [http://dec.alaska.gov/eh/fss/seafood/Shellfish_Home.html](http://dec.alaska.gov/eh/fss/seafood/Shellfish_Home.html)
Case Definition: Saxitoxin

Clinical description

Exposure to saxitoxin most commonly occurs following ingestion of certain fish that contain it in their tissues. Ingestion of saxitoxin can cause numbness of the oral mucosa as quickly as 30 minutes after exposure. In severe poisoning, illness typically progresses rapidly and may include gastrointestinal (nausea, vomiting) and neurological (cranial nerve dysfunction, a floating sensation, headache, muscle weakness, parasthesias and vertigo) signs and symptoms. Respiratory failure and death can occur from paralysis (1-5).

Laboratory criteria for diagnosis

- **Biologic**: A case in which saxitoxin in urine is detected, as determined by the CDC laboratory. (1-5)
- **Environmental**: Detection of saxitoxin in ingested compounds or seafood. (7-10)

Case classification

- **Suspected**: A case in which a potentially exposed person is being evaluated by health-care workers or public health officials for poisoning by a particular chemical agent, but no specific credible threat exists.
- **Probable**: A clinically compatible case in which a high index of suspicion (credible threat or patient history regarding location and time) exists for saxitoxin exposure, or an epidemiologic link exists between this case and a laboratory-confirmed case.
- **Confirmed**: A clinically compatible case in which laboratory tests have confirmed exposure.

The case can be confirmed if laboratory testing was not performed because either a predominant amount of clinical and nonspecific laboratory evidence of a particular chemical was present or the etiology of the agent is known with 100% certainty.

Additional resources


Paralytic Shellfish Poisoning Outbreak Questionnaire

Date ____/____/______    Time____________

Healthcare provider reporting _________________________ Phone (      ) ________________________

Name of patient_____________________________________ Phone (      ) ________________________

Address_____________________________  City____________________ State_______________

DOB ____/____/______  Sex:  M □  F □  Race____________

If caller is not a healthcare provider and reports PSP symptoms, was the caller advised to seek immediate medical evaluation?  Yes_______   No______ Comments_____________________________________________________

Symptoms:

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Paresthesias (mouth, lips, face, extremities)

Nausea

Vomiting

Weakness

Ataxia

Shortness of breath

Difficulty with speech (dysarthria)

Dysphagia

Dizzy

Headache

Floating sensation

Location of beach where shellfish were gathered______________________________________

Date shellfish gathered ____/____/______             Date shellfish consumed ____/____/______

Time shellfish consumed _______AM/PM  Number of shellfish eaten ______________

Type of shellfish:   Butter clams   Mussels   Cockles   Razor clams   Little Neck clams   Crabmeat

Cooked: Yes □  No □  Method________________________________________________

If boiled, was shellfish juice consumed separately?              Yes          No □

Were siphons or viscera removed prior to eating shellfish?  Yes □  No □

If crabmeat, were any of the intestines eaten?              Yes □  No □

Specimens collected for shipping?              Yes          No □

How many other people consumed the shellfish? _____      How many became ill?  ______

Protocol for specimen collection

Collect portions of the meal and store it in a Ziploc® freezer bag.
If shellfish is still in the shell and can be sent immediately to DEC laboratory, refrigerate. If any delay anticipated, freeze the samples.
If shellfish were steamed or boiled, collect and store the broth separately.
Document the date, time of day, and exact the location where shellfish were collected.
If gastric contents have been collected, freeze and save (only if gastric contents contain whole animals).
If onset of patient symptoms occurred within past 7 days, collect urine and immediately freeze. Ship frozen to ASPHL.

11/15/13
Environmental Health Laboratory shellfish submission instructions for saxitoxin testing in suspected PSP outbreaks

Please send the frozen shellfish to the Environmental Health Laboratory (EHL) along with the completed Marine Toxins submission form. Packing instructions are as follows:

- Place shellfish and submission form in a sturdy, leak-proof box. A Coleman cooler, fish box (or equivalent) works well for this purpose. Bag the shellfish and add newspaper or other absorbent material in the shipping container for sweating of ice packs or any leaking. Packaging shellfish in envelopes or other non-sturdy, non-leak-proof containers is not acceptable (or legal!) and will result in the samples being rejected by the laboratory.

- Add sufficient frozen gel packs or gel ice to keep samples cool during transport, even if samples are packed frozen. Assemble frozen gel-packs along the bottom and against the sides of the cooler/insulated shipping container. Samples received >10°C interfere with the integrity of the analysis and will be rejected.

- Place completed Marine Toxins Submission Form in a separate Ziploc® bag.

- Gold Streak to the ADEC Environmental Health Laboratory:
  5251 Dr. MLK Jr. Ave.
  Anchorage, AK  99507-1293
  NOA 227-8444
  DEC.EH-Lab-ShippingReceiving@alaska.gov

- Please call the Environmental Health Laboratory (907-375-8231; DEC.EH-Lab-ShippingReceiving@alaska.gov shipping and receiving) or the Section of Epidemiology (907-269-8000, or after hours at 800-478-0084) with the air-bill number, airline and arrival time. DO NOT ship specimens on the weekend.

The EHL Sample Submission Manual is available at: 

Updated 11/19/2013
PSP Talking Points

- Paralytic shellfish poisoning (PSP) is a foodborne illness that is most commonly caused by consumption of shellfish that contain saxitoxin, a potent neurotoxin produced by dinoflagellate algae.
- Bivalve shellfish that consume these algae accumulate saxitoxin in their tissue.
- The incubation period for PSP ranges from minutes to hours.
- Symptoms:
  - Patients typically present with mild symptoms such as paraesthesias (e.g., perioral and extremity numbness and tingling), and gastrointestinal symptoms (e.g., nausea and vomiting).
  - More severe cases may involve dyspnea, muscle weakness or frank paralysis, ataxia and respiratory insufficiency.
  - PSP toxins can, in high doses, affect cardiac tissue and lead to cardiovascular failure.
- Treatment:
  - Seek medical care as soon as possible if symptoms arise.
  - If the patient is unconscious, monitor their airway, breathing and heartbeat.
  - Perform CPR if needed and continue until help arrives.
- Symptomatic treatment, including respiratory support, is crucial for successful outcomes.
- Recovery is typically complete with symptom resolution within hours to days after onset.
- Personal harvest of shellfish is not safe.
- Commercially harvested product is safe:
  - DEC performs testing of shellfish from commercial beaches to determine safe levels of saxitoxin.
  - Alaska regulations require each commercially harvested batch of shellfish to pass the PSP test prior to market.
- Saxitoxin is 1,000 times more lethal than cyanide:
  - A single shellfish can contain enough toxin to make up to 200 people sick.
- Cooking shellfish prior to consumption does not make it safe to eat.
- Because other persons who shared the suspected food or who collected shellfish from the same public area may be at risk for illness, every case of PSP is considered a public health emergency and must be reported immediately to SOE.
- Background:
  - Most cases of PSP poisoning likely go unreported.
  - Probable and confirmed PSP outbreaks in AK have been reported every month. (AKSTARS data lacks Dec, but pre-AKSTARS, EPI has at least one probable case reported in SE in Dec).
  - PSP outbreaks have occurred on Kodiak Island, the southern edge of the eastern half of the Aleutian Islands, and Southeast, but outbreaks have occurred throughout AK population centers south of 60º north latitude.
  - Outbreaks have involved consumption of butter clams, mussels, and cockles, but outbreaks have also been associated with consumption of many other species of shellfish as well as consumption of crab viscera.
- There is no safe way to recreationally harvest shellfish.

Updated 10/24/2013
Paralytic Shellfish Poisoning Fact Sheet

What is paralytic shellfish poisoning?
Paralytic shellfish poisoning (PSP) is a serious illness caused by eating shellfish contaminated with dinoflagellate algae that produce harmful toxins. Some of these toxins are 1,000 times more potent than cyanide, and toxin levels contained in a single shellfish can be fatal to humans.

What are the symptoms of PSP?
Early symptoms of PSP include tingling of the lips and tongue, which may begin within minutes of eating toxic shellfish or may take an hour or two to develop. Symptoms may progress to tingling of fingers and toes and then the loss of muscle control in the arms and legs, followed by difficulty in breathing. Some people have experienced a sense of floating or nausea. Muscles of the chest and abdomen may become paralyzed. With high toxin exposures, death can occur in as little as 2 hours from paralysis of the breathing muscles.

How do PSP toxins cause paralysis in humans?
PSP toxins cause paralysis in humans by blocking sodium channels in neurons, thereby preventing neurons from functioning normally.

What causes unsafe levels of PSP?
The amount of toxins increases when water conditions are favorable. However, the exact combination of conditions that cause “blooms” of toxin-producing algae is not known. Colder months (or months with an “R”) are not free from PSP risk.

Which seafoods pose a PSP risk to humans?
All bivalve molluscan shellfish including clams, mussels, oysters, geoducks, and scallops can contain PSP toxins. While crabmeat has not been found to contain PSP toxins, the guts/butter of crabs has been found to contain PSP toxins; therefore, consumers of noncommercially harvested crab should clean the meat thoroughly, discard the guts/butter before boiling, and avoid drinking the broth in which the crab was boiled. Predatory gastropods such as moon snails can also become toxic and thereby pose a risk to humans.

Is the shellfish safe to eat if I cook it?
No! Cooking shellfish doesn’t make them safe to eat because the PSP toxins are not destroyed by heating or freezing.

If someone else eats shellfish harvested from a certain beach and doesn’t get sick, does that mean the beach is safe?
No, never assume a beach is safe even if someone has eaten shellfish without getting sick. Toxins can be present in varying amounts in shellfish on the same beach.

Who is most at risk?
Anyone who eats noncommercially harvested shellfish is at risk for PSP.
If the water looks dirty or red, does that mean that shellfish will contain PSP toxins?  
No, paralytic shellfish toxins are rarely associated with a red tinge to the water; reddish coloration of the water is more commonly caused by non-toxic organisms.

If the water is not red, does that mean that shellfish are not contaminated?  
No, PSP can be present in large amounts even if the water looks clear. Also, the toxin can remain in shellfish long after the algae bloom is over.

Can I tell if it’s safe to gather shellfish by how they look?  
No, only laboratories can reliably test shellfish for PSP. Toxins can be present with no visible signs.

Can I safely harvest in colder months?  
No, there have been cases of PSP in Alaska year-round. There may be some seasonality associated with the level of PSP risk, but it is never completely safe to consume noncommercially harvested shellfish.

How can I protect my family and myself from paralytic shellfish poisoning?  
The only way to protect your family and yourself from PSP is by not eating noncommercial shellfish collected from beaches in Alaska. Commercial shellfish in Alaska are routinely tested and are considered safe to eat.

What should I do if I think that I have paralytic shellfish poisoning?  
Seek medical care immediately. Call 911 or have someone take you to the emergency room.

What is the treatment?  
Unfortunately, there is no antidote for PSP toxins; however, supportive medical care can be life saving. For example, persons whose breathing muscles become paralyzed can be put on a mechanical respirator and given oxygen to help them breathe, and people who develop a cardiac arrhythmia (abnormal heart rhythm) can be given medications to stabilize their heart rhythm.

Are there any other illnesses associated with shellfish?  
Yes, a person may have an allergic reaction to shellfish or become ill due to bacteria or viruses in shellfish.

What else can be done to prevent these diseases?  
It is important to notify public health departments about even one person with PSP or any other illness caused by consumption of shellfish. Public health departments can then investigate to determine the source of the problem to help prevent additional illness. Any suspected cases of PSP should be reported to the State of Alaska Section of Epidemiology at 907-269-8000 or after hours at 1-800-478-0084.

What if I choose to eat noncommercially harvested shellfish despite these risks?  
The Alaska Division of Public Health strongly recommends against eating noncommercial shellfish from Alaska waters. We know collecting and eating shellfish is a long held traditional practice, but encourage people to know their risks.