



DEC NEWS

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DEC warns of PSP in shellfish

June 22, 2005--Shellfish gatherers should be cautious of the dangers of Paralytic Shellfish Poison (PSP) from clams and mussels gathered on Alaska beaches. The Department of Environmental Conservation's (DEC) advice is do not eat shellfish from beaches that DEC has not classified as safe.

"The risks of PSP from clams and mussels from unclassified beaches are real. Don't eat them," said Mike Ostasz, DEC's shellfish program coordinator. PSP occurs widely in Alaska and strikes people nearly every year. PSP comes from algae, a food source for filter-feeding shellfish like clams and mussels. The shellfish store the toxin from the algae in their tissue. The toxin can be present even when there is no visible discoloration in shellfish or so-called red tides in the water. Some clams, like Butter clams, can retain the toxin for two to three years, while others like Little Neck clams retain the toxin for a few months.

The only areas considered safe for collecting shellfish are areas the department classifies, where DEC tests clams and mussels on a regular basis. Commercially grown and harvested clams, mussels and other shellfish available in grocery stores and restaurants are tested regularly before marketing.

Classified safe beaches include: Halibut Cove Lagoon, Jakolof Bay, Kasitsna Bay (McDonald Spit), Tutka Bay, Chugachik Island, Sadie Cove, Polly Creek and Crescent River, all located in the Cook Inlet and Kachemak Bay area.

Symptoms of PSP may appear soon after ingestion. Initial symptoms are a tingling or numbness in the lips and tongue, often followed by tingling and numbness in the fingertips and toes. These symptoms may progress to loss of muscle coordination, dizziness, weakness, drowsiness and incoherence.

Vomiting should be induced at the first sign of the onset of symptoms as there is no antidote, and medical attention should be sought immediately. Severe cases can cause respiratory paralysis within twelve hours of consumption, so it vital to get the person to the nearest medical facility with a respirator.

The toxin has also been found in crab viscera, although the rest of the crab is considered safe. DEC cautions eating crab viscera from certain areas. To find out what locations are unsafe for PSP, contact Manny Soares at (907) 269-7640 or Mike Ostasz at (907) 269-7638.