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STATE OF ALASKA

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### **Alaskans should know the health risks when harvesting shellfish**

June 26, 2019 ANCHORAGE —High levels of algal toxins that can lead to paralytic shellfish poisoning (PSP) are being identified in non-commercially harvested shellfish from numerous Alaska communities. Recreational gatherers should be cautious of the dangers of PSP from shellfish harvested on beaches across Alaska. There are NO beaches that are certified or designated as "safe" beaches for shellfish harvesting in Alaska. Non-commercially harvested shellfish may contain paralytic shellfish toxins that, if ingested, can cause death. Anyone consuming non-commercial shellfish does so at his or her own risk.

Southeast Alaska Tribal Ocean Research (SEATOR) and the Sitka Tribe of Alaska Environmental Research Lab test for PSP toxins in foraged shellfish from some Southeast Alaska and Gulf of Alaska beaches and issue site-specific advisories for areas that show elevated levels based on test results. Some of their recent test results have shown levels of PSP toxins over 50 times the threshold safe for human consumption in shellfish. Recent testing by other entities has also shown elevated levels of PSP toxins in shellfish collected on the Aleutians and Kodiak Island.

Commercially harvested shellfish, however, are considered safe to consume. This is because commercial harvesters are required by the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation to have products regularly tested for toxins that can cause PSP.

The public should be aware that PSP toxins are *not* destroyed by cooking or freezing shellfish before consumption. PSP toxins have also been found in crab viscera, known as crab butter; crab should be cleaned and eviscerated before being cooked.

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 breathing. Some people may experience a sense of floating or nausea. Muscles of the chest and abdomen may become paralyzed; if this happens, death can occur in a matter of hours. Treatment is supportive care, which may require mechanical ventilation; there is no antitoxin. If you think you have PSP symptoms, call 911 and seek immediate medical attention.

Suspected cases of PSP should be reported as soon as possible to the State of Alaska Section of Epidemiology at 907-269-8000 or after hours at 1-800-478-0084. Public health officials will investigate and help prevent additional cases from occurring.

For more information on shellfish harvesting and PSP, go to:

- [Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation, Paralytic Shellfish Poisoning](#)
- [Alaska Department of Health and Social Services, Shellfish Poisoning Resources](#)

Additional Alaska-specific shellfish toxin information, including regional testing results, is available at:

- [SEATOR](#)
- [Kachemak Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve](#)
- [Alaska Harmful Algal Bloom Network](#)

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