

Features

Office of Medical Information
The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas

Spring 1991

CONTACT: Jennifer Donovan
Office: 214/688-3404
Home: 214/328-3193

****Summer seafood can be trouble on the halfshell

DALLAS -- Whether they go to the seashore or just bring the seashore home from the supermarket, many Americans count shrimp boils, crab feasts and oyster roasts among summer's special pleasures.

But summer seafood can spell trouble if it's raw or undercooked, warns an infectious diseases specialist at The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas. The trouble comes from a number of disease agents that thrive in seafood and in man including the virus that causes hepatitis A, the salmonella bacteria (including the one that causes typhoid fever) and a family of salt water bacteria called marine vibrios, said Dr. William Baine, an associate professor in the Departments of Internal Medicine and Microbiology at UT Southwestern.

One species of vibrio causes cholera; in fact an outbreak in Louisiana in 1978 was traced to home-cooked crabs taken from contaminated waters. But cholera is rare in the Western Hemisphere. The marine species Vibrio parahaemolyticus and Vibrio vulnificus are more likely sources of summertime distress for Americans, Baine said.

Vibrio parahaemolyticus usually strikes within 12 to 24 hours after eating contaminated raw or inadequately cooked shellfish or any food that has come in contact with contaminated shellfish. Causing abdominal cramps and watery diarrhea in most cases, it occasionally

(More)

produces dysentery-like symptoms with high fever. Almost never fatal, it causes gastrointestinal distress for one day to a week.

Vibrio vulnificus poses a particularly insidious threat, Baine said. Entering the body through a skin wound, these salt water bacteria can cause a nasty local infection that can spread to the bloodstream and cause a rapid, fatal illness. A cut received from a clam or oyster shell or any other shellfish should not be ignored, no matter how slight, Baine said. It should be thoroughly washed with clean, fresh water and soap as soon as possible after the injury, and if signs of infection such as pain, redness or swelling occur, see a doctor promptly, he advised.

Anyone who has active or chronic liver disease is particularly vulnerable to *Vibrio vulnificus* bloodstream infection acquired by eating raw oysters and should never eat them, Baine said. For others, "It's a spin of the wheel."

Baine himself stopped eating raw shellfish after a bout of gastrointestinal agony during a series of lectures he was giving in Italy. "Shellfish are concentrators of bacteria," the UT Southwestern professor explained. "They filter a lot of water, and if that water is contaminated, the contamination levels in shellfish will be much higher than in the water around them. They run the water through but they keep the bugs."

To prevent vibrio and most other shellfish infections, Baine recommends:

- Don't collect shellfish in posted areas.
- Don't rinse shellfish or their containers in sea water.
- Don't eat shellfish raw.

(More)

--Cook shellfish, crabs and shrimp thoroughly. It helps to use several smaller containers rather than one large one when cooking large quantities, to assure an even cooking temperature throughout.

--Keep seafood adequately refrigerated until cooking and afterwards if it is not served immediately. Refrigeration also works best if large portions are divided into smaller portions for chilling.

--Clean work surfaces, containers and utensils that have come in contact with raw shellfish thoroughly to avoid contamination of cooked food by bacteria left over from the raw seafood.

###