

# RECREATIONAL SHELLFISH HARVESTING AND SHELLFISH SAFELY

## Get It Clean, Keep It Cold, Know Your Risk!

### Things to Remember:

- ◇ Shellfish may carry contamination or bacteria that can make you sick
- ◇ Harvest only from approved areas
- ◇ Bacteria grow very fast when temperatures are hot
- ◇ Cover your shellfish with ice or keep it under 45F
- ◇ Cooking to 145F kills shellfish bacteria
- ◇ People with a serious illness should only eat cooked shellfish

Contamination can be present in certain shellfish harvest areas. Naturally occurring bacteria called *Vibrio* is also always present and can multiply quickly in oysters and clams at warm temperatures. If shellfish are not harvested and handled properly, people may get sick. Regulators and the commercial shellfish industry work hard to ensure the shellfish you buy are safe for you to eat. Continue reading to learn the facts about safe recreational shellfish harvesting and handling.



*Recreational shellfish harvesting*

### How can I avoid contaminated shellfish?

Harvesting and eating shellfish from waters with high levels of bacteria or chemicals can make you sick. The NJ Department of Environmental Protection tests all harvest waters in New Jersey and provides current information on which areas are safe for harvesting. Visit this website for more information: [nj.gov/dep/bmw/nssp/home.html](http://nj.gov/dep/bmw/nssp/home.html).

### What is *Vibrio* bacteria and how does it make people sick?

*Vibrio* bacteria is naturally found in salty or brackish waters around the world. It multiplies quickly in warmer temperatures. *Vibrio* bacteria in shellfish held at warm temperatures, then eaten raw, may make you sick. People who have serious illnesses (liver disease, cancer, diabetes, HIV, thalassemia), receive immune-suppressing therapy, have had stomach surgery, or take medicine to decrease stomach acid levels are much more vulnerable to *Vibrio* illness than the general population.

### Vibrio Illness Case\*

*"We had our annual seafood festival in July at our local community club. I enjoyed eating some raw shellfish along with other seafood. Unfortunately, a day later, I got diarrhea and had bad abdominal cramps. I was in the hospital for 5 days and had to take 3 antibiotics. The doctor told me that I got an illness from a bacteria called Vibrio. She warned me that because I am a diabetic and have late stage kidney disease, I should not eat raw shellfish. I have been eating raw shellfish since I was a kid, but now I understand that it is not worth the risk. I feel lucky that I recovered. I will only eat cooked shellfish from now on."*



**Joseph L.**  
79-year-old  
NJ resident

\*This statement is based on an actual *Vibrio* case.

# HANDLING SHELLFISH SAFELY AFTER HARVEST



1. The safest method is to bring a cooler with plenty of ice to hold shellfish after you harvest them.
2. A floating tube with a net or other container that allows water circulation is a good idea to reduce the time your shellfish spend out of the water.
3. When you get home, wash the shellfish under cold water and place them immediately into refrigeration at 45F or less.
4. Cooking shellfish to an internal temperature of 145F will kill *Vibrio* bacteria.
5. If you plan to eat your shellfish raw, take them out of refrigeration and serve them immediately.



*Vibrio vulnificus* is a form of *Vibrio* bacteria that can, on rare occasions, cause illness when someone eats raw oysters or exposes an open wound to salty or brackish water. An infection caused by *Vibrio vulnificus* can be severe for people with serious illnesses such as liver disease. To avoid *Vibrio vulnificus*, cook shellfish to 145F, stay out of salty water when you have open wounds, or cover wounds with waterproof bandages. If you get cuts while handling shellfish, wash cuts immediately. Find more information about *Vibrio* at: [www.cdc.gov/vibrio/faq.html](http://www.cdc.gov/vibrio/faq.html).

Virginia Wheatley  
Shellfish Project Coordinator  
Public Health & Food Protection Program  
[virginia.wheatley@doh.nj.gov](mailto:virginia.wheatley@doh.nj.gov)  
609-826-4935  
<https://www.nj.gov/health/ceohs/food-drug-safety/>

