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Man who ate Southeast clams develops symptoms of shellfish poisoning

State health officials caution Alaskans about eating recreationally harvested shellfish

ANCHORAGE — An adult man who ate clams from a beach near Ketchikan Sunday, May 22, 2011, developed symptoms characteristic of paralytic shellfish poisoning (PSP).

The Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation tested samples from this clam harvest, and the tests came back late Tuesday afternoon positive for a toxin that causes PSP, a potentially life-threatening illness in people who have eaten contaminated shellfish.

On Sunday, the man consumed steamed clams that were harvested the previous day from the South Point Higgins Beach, located about 11 miles north of Ketchikan. Within an hour of eating the clams, he began to feel tingling in his lips, fingers, and toes; dizziness; weakness; and decreased coordination — symptoms characteristic of PSP. The man was taken to a local hospital Sunday night and discharged Tuesday.

“This person’s illness is an unfortunate reminder that PSP is a serious public health concern,” said Dr. Joe McLaughlin, Alaska’s State Epidemiologist. “Shellfish that are recreationally harvested anywhere in Alaska can potentially have dangerous levels of PSP.”

All locally harvested shellfish — including clams, mussels, oysters, geoducks and scallops — can contain paralytic shellfish poison. Crabmeat is not known to contain the PSP toxin, but the guts can contain unsafe levels and should be discarded. PSP cannot be cooked or cleaned out of shellfish. Commercially grown shellfish is tested and considered safe.

Early symptoms of PSP often include tingling of the lips and tongue. Symptoms may progress to tingling of fingers and toes, then loss of control of arms and legs, followed by difficulty in breathing. Death can result in as little as two hours.

Paralytic shellfish poisoning is considered a public health emergency. Suspected cases must be reported immediately to the Section of Epidemiology by health care providers at 907-269-8000 during work hours or 800-478-0084 after hours.

For more information on PSP go to:

http://www.cdc.gov/nczved/divisions/dfbmd/diseases/marine_toxins/

<http://www.epi.alaska.gov/id/dod/psp/default.htm>

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