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July 27, 2001

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VIRGINIA HEALTH COMMISSIONER ADVISES PUBLIC ON RISK OF EATING RAW OYSTERS AND CLAMS

(Richmond, Va.)—Virginia's Commissioner of Health E. Anne Peterson, M.D., M.P.H., is advising the public about the risk of eating **raw** oysters and clams. "Oysters and clams are a great source of protein and are delicious to eat, but Virginians need to be aware of the illnesses that may be associated with eating raw molluscan shellfish," Dr. Peterson said.

Different kinds of *Vibrio* bacteria are found naturally in coastal waters and are not a result of pollution. *Vibrio* bacteria can be found in waters approved for oyster and clam harvesting. Although rare, *Vibrio* bacteria can cause gastrointestinal illness in people who eat raw or undercooked oysters or clams, regardless of age or health history.

"During the warm weather months more of the bacteria can be found in shellfish and the risk is higher. Some cases of people getting sick have been reported to the state health department this year, which is why we want consumers to be aware that if they eat raw oysters or clams they may be at risk of illness. The best way to eliminate your risk is to only eat thoroughly cooked oysters or clams," Dr. Peterson said.

The Interstate Shellfish Sanitation Conference's annual meeting in Norfolk this week focused on how to deal with these illnesses. One way the ISSC plans to protect people is to educate consumers about the risk of eating raw shellfish.

For some people considered high risk, one particular kind of *Vibrio* bacteria (*Vibrio vulnificus*) can cause serious illness or even death. People at "high risk" include those who have liver disease, excessive alcohol intake, diabetes, AIDS or HIV infection, stomach disorders, inflammatory bowel disease, cancer, abnormal iron metabolism, steroid dependency or any illness or medical treatment which results in a compromised immune system.

"The Virginia Department of Health recommends that high risk individuals with certain health conditions only eat thoroughly cooked oysters and clams," Dr. Peterson said. "Older adults are more likely to have the specific health conditions and should be aware of their health status."

The *Vibrio* bacteria do not change the appearance, taste, or odor of oysters or clams. Eating raw oysters or clams with hot sauce or while drinking alcohol does not destroy the bacteria. Only thoroughly cooking the oysters or clams will destroy the bacteria and eliminate risk of infection.

Infection also can occur when cuts, burns or sores are exposed to seawater containing *Vibrio* bacteria. If you get a cut or wound while in the water, clean the wound with soap and water or a disinfectant, such as hydrogen peroxide. If you notice signs of infection, such as redness or swelling, see your doctor.

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Symptoms of illness from *Vibrio* bacteria include vomiting, diarrhea, stomach pains, severe weakness, skin rashes, blisters, shaking chills and high fever. If you have any of these symptoms, see your doctor for medical treatment.

For more information, log onto the Virginia Department of Health's Web site at www.vdh.state.va.us.

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