



NEWS

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RISK OF CONTRACTING INFECTIOUS BACTERIA IN THE CHESAPEAKE BAY IS RARE

(Richmond, Va.)—According to the Virginia Department of Health, the public's risk of contracting the infectious bacteria *Vibrio vulnificus* in the Chesapeake Bay is very rare. "People who swim and fish in the Chesapeake Bay are at a minimal risk of contracting *Vibrio vulnificus* and should continue to enjoy the water," according to E. Anne Peterson, M.D., M.P.H., Virginia Commissioner of Health.

"Despite recent media reports, *Vibrio vulnificus* is not a flesh-eating bacteria. The bacteria can enter through a cut in the skin and cause mild to serious wound infection. In some people the infection resolves by itself, in other cases it progresses to severe skin damage," Dr. Peterson said.

Vibrio vulnificus is a naturally occurring bacterium in marine and estuarine waters throughout the world. This organism can be found in Virginia's coastal waters and is most prevalent during the warm months of the year.

Human infections from *Vibrio vulnificus* are rare. Three cases have been reported to the Virginia Department of Health so far this year. Four cases were reported in 1999, and three cases were reported in 1998. The last reported death due to *Vibrio vulnificus* was in 1999 in Virginia. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 58 cases of *Vibrio vulnificus* were reported in the United States in 1997 and 1998, compared to more than 400 million visits to beaches and recreational areas in the United States every year.

"*Vibrio vulnificus* can be contracted by eating raw shellfish. But healthy people are rarely infected," according to Lucy A. Peipins, Ph.D., Director of the state health department's Division of Waterborne Hazards Control. People with liver disease such as cirrhosis or those with compromised immune systems are at high risk of severe or fatal infection from *Vibrio vulnificus*. No cases of *Vibrio vulnificus* infections have ever been reported from eating Virginia harvested shellfish.

"If you get a cut or scrape in marine or estuarine waters, be sure to clean the wound. Use soap and water or a disinfectant such as hydrogen peroxide. Cleaning the wound is important to avoid infection. If you notice any infection, see your physician," Dr. Peipins said.

People with pre-existing open wounds should avoid coming in contact with marine or estuarine waters and should wash all cuts and wounds that occur while in the water. "Otherwise, people can continue to work or swim in the Chesapeake Bay," according to Dr. Peipins.

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