**GUIDANCE** **FOR THE SAFE HANDLING OF SHELLFISH**

**(For Virginia Department of Health Food Establishments)**

 **QUESTION:**

Why is this specific guidance necessary?

**ANSWER:**

Recently there has been a noticeable increase in illnesses due to a particular bacteria associated with people consuming raw clams and oysters. The name of this bacteria is *Vibrio parahemoyticus.*

**QUESTION:**

What is *Vibrio parahemolyticus* (Vp)?

**ANSWER:**

*Vp*, as well as *Vibrio vulnificus* (Vv) bacteria, live naturally in warm marine waters. Reports of illnesses linked to *Vibrio* bacteria commonly intensify between May and September, when bacteria multiply as water temperatures increase. Oysters and clams are filter feeders, and as such, concentrate *Vibrio* bacteria in their meat. Vp may affect most all consumers of raw shellfish while Vv generally affects the elderly, people with compromised immune systems, and those with chronic illness such as diabetes or liver disease are more likely to develop illness and experience more severe symptoms.

**QUESTION:**

How can Virginia Department of Health (VDH) permitted Food Establishments help to prevent people from getting sick from *Vibrio*?

**ANSWER:**

**All shellfish must be received at 45ºF or below and immediately placed under refrigeration and held at 41ºF or below. Any shellfish delivery received above 45º is considered temperature abused and should be rejected.**  **When temperatures of shellfish rise, *Vibrio* bacteria multiply fast inside the living shellfish!**

**VDH food establishments must purchase shellfish from certified dealers only.**

Shellfish with Harvester tags are not acceptable or approved for use in VDH Food Establishments.

To check if a dealer is certified, please refer to <http://www.cfsan.fda.gov/~ear/shellfish.html>

A certified dealer tag must be attached to each bushel, bag, or box of shellfish received. The tag must remain attached to the container until it is completely empty. VDH Food Establishments must retain all tags on site for 90 days from the date the container is emptied with that date noted. Ensure that shellfish from one tagged or labeled container are not commingled with shellfish from another container.

**QUESTION:**

Does cooking clams and oysters kill the *Vibrio* bacteria?

**ANSWER:**

Yes, if properly cooked. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration recommends that shellfish in the shell be heated until their shells open, then steamed for an additional 4-9 minutes or boiled for 3-5 minutes. Less thorough cooking could lead to *Vibrio*-related illness in consumers.

Discard any raw shellfish with open shells, as well as those that do not open during cooking. Use smaller pots to boil or steam shellfish so that heat is evenly distributed and all shellfish are thoroughly cooked. For shucked shellfish, boil or simmer for at least 3 minutes or until the edges curl. Fry at 375ºF for at least 3 minutes, broil 3 inches from heat for 3 minutes, or bake at 450ºF for 10 minutes.

**QUESTION:**

What about customers who buy raw product directly from us?

**ANSWER:**

Should a consumer purchase raw shellfish to take home, the retail establishment should pack the shellfish in one bag and place on ice by double bagging, or by placing the product on ice in a proper container. Advise the consumer to place the shellfish into their refrigerator immediately after they come home. It would be helpful to provide a sticker for containers that advise consumers to “KEEP COLD ON ICE OR PLACE IN REFRIGERATION IMMEDIATELY.”

**QUESTION:**

I have a raw bar display at my establishment. Is there anything I should be aware of?

**ANSWER:**

Keep raw shellfish on ice and only display a supply of product that is capable of being maintained at or below 41ºF. Do not place a large quantity of product on top of other products because this prevents proper cooling. Check the temperature of the raw bar and the shellfish meat often by using a stem type thermometer.

**OYSTER STORAGE & HANDLING GUIDELINES**

**General Handling Tips**

* Keep raw oysters separate from cooked oysters or other foods, to avoid cross-contamination
* Thoroughly clean cutting boards, countertops and utensils after exposure to raw oyster products

**Storage**

Fresh, Raw Shellstock (in shell):

* Wash to remove excess debris before refrigerating
* Keep refrigerated between 34-41 degrees Fahrenheit in a well-ventilated container (i.e. bowl covered with a clean, damp cloth)—do not store in an airtight container

Shucked Oysters:

* Keep refrigerated between 34-41 degrees Fahrenheit, and use by the expiration date on the container
* Freezing softens oyster meat, so thawed oysters are not usually used for raw consumption
* Freeze quickly at 0 degrees Fahrenheit or lower, and keep frozen at that temperature
* Freezer bags or plastic containers are best for freezing oysters
* Freeze completely immersed in liquid, remove excess air from container to prevent freezer burn
* Do not keep frozen longer than 3-4 months before using
* Thaw in the refrigerator for at least 24 hours
* Never refreeze thawed oysters

**Note: Vibrio vulnificus is not destroyed by refrigeration or freezing, only by thorough cooking.**

A **Consumer Advisory** is required If shellfish is served or sold raw or undercooked, either in ready-to-eat form or as an ingredient in another ready-to-eat food. The permit holder shall inform consumers of the significantly increased risk of consuming such foods by using brochures, deli case or menu advisories, label statements, table tents, placards, or other effective written means. The reminder shall include a description, such as "oysters on the half shell (raw oysters)," or asterisking the animal-derived foods requiring disclosure to a footnote that states:

1. "Regarding the safety of these items, written information is available upon request";

2. “Consuming raw or undercooked meats, poultry, seafood, shellfish, or eggs may increase your risk of foodborne illness”; or

 3. “Consuming raw or undercooked meats, poultry, seafood, shellfish, or eggs may increase your risk of foodborne illness, especially if you have certain medical conditions."

For more information, **GO TO**: FDA’s Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition (CFSAN) website at: <http://www.cfsan.fda.gov> ,or call the Food and Drug Administration’s Seafood Hotline at 1-800-FDA-4010.

**Eastern Shore Health District Virginia Department of Health**