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Albertans encouraged to cook shellfish to reduce risk of illness

CALGARY – As investigation into 19 cases of *Vibrio parahaemolyticus* infection in Alberta continues, Alberta Health Services (AHS) is reminding all Albertans of the risk of this illness and important precautions to protect themselves.

Vibrio parahaemolyticus – a bacteria that occurs naturally in ocean waters – can be found in shellfish such as oysters, clams, mussels, scallops and cockles. Often found in higher concentrations during the summer months (when water temperatures rise), this bacteria can cause illness in humans who consume raw or undercooked shellfish contaminated with high numbers of this bacteria.

To reduce risk of illness, AHS advises Albertans to:

- eat only properly cooked shellfish. As cooking will destroy the bacteria and decrease the risk of illness, it is recommended that Albertans avoid eating any raw or undercooked shellfish.
- discard any shellfish that do not open when cooked.
- eat shellfish right away after cooking and promptly refrigerate leftovers.
- keep raw and cooked shellfish separate.
- keep purchased shellfish cold. Refrigerate immediately after purchase, and keep at temperatures below 4°C.
- avoid eating oysters, or other seafood, when taking antacids, as reduced stomach acid may allow the *Vibrio* bacteria to survive and grow in the intestinal tract.
- avoid exposing open wounds or broken skin to warm salt or brackish water, or to raw shellfish. Wear protective clothing (like gloves) when handling raw shellfish.
- wash hands well with soap before handling any food. Be sure to wash your hands, cutting boards, counters, knives and other utensils after preparing raw foods.

Vibrio parahaemolyticus infection most commonly causes watery diarrhea and abdominal cramps. Other symptoms include nausea, vomiting, fever, headache and bloody stools. Although anyone who consumes raw shellfish is at risk of this illness, people with weakened immune systems, young children, pregnant women and older adults are at increased risk for developing complications if they get sick. Individuals who do develop these symptoms within 12 to 24 hours of eating raw shellfish are advised to contact Health Link at 811 to report the illness.

Symptoms typically last for three days to a week and usually do not require any treatment; however, any Albertan whose symptoms persist or become more severe should visit a doctor.

For more information on this issue, and the ongoing joint investigation into this outbreak, visit <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/phn-asp/2015/vibrioparahaemolyticus-eng.php>.

Alberta Health Services is the provincial health authority responsible for planning and delivering health supports and services for more than four million adults and children living in Alberta. Its mission is to provide a patient-focused, quality health system that is accessible and sustainable for all Albertans.

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For media inquiries, contact:

Shannon M. Evans

AHS Communications

403.618.1960

shannon.evans@albertahealthservices.ca