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For immediate release: July 20, 2006 (06-112)

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Bacterial contamination of Washington oysters causes dozens of illnesses

Thorough cooking is best prevention

OLYMPIA — Since July 10 nearly four dozen Washington residents have become ill after eating raw oysters contaminated with naturally occurring bacteria. *Vibrio parahaemolyticus* is a bacteria naturally found in seawater. Two people were hospitalized as a result of their illness, but there have been no deaths. As a result of these illnesses, three growing areas in Hood Canal as well as Totten and Eld inlets in South Puget Sound have been closed to commercial harvest of oysters for raw consumption.

Almost all of these cases are associated with the consumption of commercial and recreationally harvested oysters from Washington. The Department of Health has also received reports from several other states and provinces regarding infections that appear to be associated with consumption of shellfish harvested in the Pacific Northwest. Growers have the option of having product shucked and labeled, "for cooking only."

The agency is investigating the outbreak, along with other local, state and provincial health agencies where similar illnesses have been reported. High levels of this kind of bacteria can grow in saltwater areas during the summer months and infection with the bacteria usually occurs after eating raw or undercooked shellfish contaminated with the bacteria.

Nancy Napolilli, director of the department's Office of Food Safety and Shellfish recommends restaurants and consumers thoroughly cook all shellfish prior to service or consumption. Those with chronic liver disease or immune dysfunction should avoid consuming raw shellfish. This includes shellfish purchased in supermarkets and farmers markets as well as any that are recreationally harvested. Shellfish should be cooked to an internal temperature of 145° F.

All licensed shellfish growers in the affected areas have been contacted; the restaurant and grocery associations in the state have also been notified. Recreational harvesters should be aware of the situation. Notification of closure for marinas and recreational beaches can be found on the agency's [Biotoxin Web site](#) (<http://www.doh.wa.gov/ehp/sf/biotoxin.htm>) or the biotoxin hotline at 1-800-562-5632. Harvesters should also look for and obey warning signs that have been posted at marinas and recreational beaches.

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