

Biotoxins - Myths & Misconceptions



Test your biotoxin knowledge.....some answers may surprise you!

True or False?

Paralytic Shellfish Poisoning (PSP) is only present in red or muddy colored water.

- **False.** Red or muddy water has little correlation with PSP, Amnesic Shellfish Poisoning (ASP) or Diarrhetic Shellfish Poisoning (DSP); in fact it's possible for shellfish to be absolutely safe if the water is red. Conversely, high levels of toxin can be present when the water appears clear.

A good test to see if shellfish are toxic is to touch one to your tongue. If your tongue tingles, it's toxic. If it doesn't, it's ok to eat.

- **False, True, and False.**

False. This is not a reliable test (in fact it's dangerous).

True. If your tongue tingles, the shellfish is HIGHLY toxic, and you may have just put yourself in danger of serious paralytic shellfish poisoning.

False. If your tongue doesn't tingle, the shellfish can still be extremely toxic and cause serious illness.

Toxic shellfish look different than non-toxic shellfish.

- **False.** Toxic and non-toxic shellfish look absolutely the same.

Antidotes for biotoxins are readily available.

- **False.** There is no antidote for [PSP](#), [ASP](#) or [DSP](#). This is why it's so important to call your health care provider if you have symptoms. The only treatment for severe cases is the use of life support systems until the toxin passes from your system.

If you view the Shellfish Safety Bulletin or call the Shellfish Safety Hotline a few days before you plan on harvesting shellfish, you'll be ok.

- **False.** Biotoxin levels can change rapidly, and there can be several closures in the course of one day. Check these resources just prior to harvesting to be sure the area you're going to is safe.

Before digging shellfish, you should call the county health department.

- **True.** The county where you're planning to dig will have current information on beaches closed for pollution or other problems.

You know shellfish are safe to eat if you see seagulls or other wildlife eating them and they don't look sick or have any symptoms.

- **False.** Observing animals that have consumed shellfish will not tell you if the shellfish are toxic. (It is, however, a pleasant pastime!)

Cooking shellfish in boiling water will remove toxins, making them safe to eat.

- **False.** Unlike bacterial pathogens such as [Vibrios](#), biotoxins do not cook out of shellfish (no matter how long you boil them!)

Biotoxins are related to water pollution.

- **False.** Biotoxins can be present in otherwise pristine waters, and even heavily polluted waters can be biotoxin-free.

You should only harvest shellfish in months that have the letter "R" in them.

- **False.** This is a common misconception. The fact is, shellfish can be toxic (or safe) at any time of the year. In Washington state, there have been high levels of biotoxins in September, October, November...you get the idea.

This misconception was actually law at one time, first enacted by the 1719 legislature of New Jersey. The law was passed in an attempt to address a spoilage issue. In the warm summer months (those without an "R" in them), shellfish would spoil on the way to market due to a lack of refrigeration during transport. (Imagine horse-drawn oyster wagons heading to town on a hot summer day!) Although modern refrigeration methods make this law obsolete, the misconception remains to this day.

Want more information?

Call the Office of Shellfish and Water Protection at (360) 236-3330
Shellfish Safety Hotline (24-hour) 1-800-562-5632

Online:

www.doh.wa.gov/CommunityandEnvironment/Shellfish/BiotoxinsIllnessPrevention/Biotoxins.aspx

For people with disabilities, this document is available on request in other formats. To submit a request, call 1-800-525-0127 (TDD/TTY call 711)