

Gastrointestinal Illness Associated with Consumption of Raw Oysters

Situation

There has been an increase in the number of acute norovirus and norovirus-like illnesses associated with the consumption of raw oysters in BC. Between November 1, 2024 – January 10, 2025, there have been 28 suspected norovirus cases reported in the Island Health region, associated with the consumption of raw oysters. Additional cases have been reported in the Vancouver Coastal Health and Fraser Health regions. Oysters and shellfish can become contaminated with norovirus in the marine environment where they are grown and harvested. Some oyster harvesting areas along the BC coast have been closed, due to the ongoing public health situation.

Clinical Presentation

Norovirus symptoms are usually self-limiting. The illness is characterized by sudden onset of abdominal cramping, nausea, vomiting, and/or diarrhea. Symptoms may also include chills, headache, myalgia, and fever. Symptoms appear within 12-48 hours after ingestion and typically last for 24-72 hours. Pregnant people, people who are immunocompromised, young children, and adults over the age of 65 are at increased risk for severe illness.

Testing

Testing is not recommended for those who are asymptomatic, even with a recent history of raw or undercooked oyster/shellfish consumption.

For patients who have eaten raw or undercooked oysters/shellfish AND who have developed gastrointestinal symptoms within 48 hours of ingestion, testing can be offered to support pathogen identification and disease surveillance. Norovirus testing is included in the new infectious diarrhea panel (IDP). This is a PCR test that is automatically run on any stool sample submitted for “culture” or “ova and parasite”. It can detect 14 different viruses, bacteria, and protozoa, including other pathogens associated with the consumption of raw oysters/shellfish, such as *Vibrio* spp. More information about the IDP can be found at the BC Guideline page [here](#).

Treatment and Prevention

For most patients, norovirus treatment is supportive. Antibiotics are not recommended for the management of norovirus illness.

Norovirus is highly contagious. Individuals with gastrointestinal illness should follow good hand hygiene and avoid preparing and handling food for others until 48 hours after symptom resolution. High touch surfaces in the patient’s environment should be disinfected with chlorine bleach. More information can be found at HealthLink BC [here](#).

Patients can reduce their risk of exposure by avoiding the consumption of raw or undercooked oysters/shellfish. Those at high risk of severe illness (e.g., pregnant people, people who are immunocompromised, young children, adults over the age of 65) should always avoid eating raw or undercooked oysters/shellfish. Oysters should be cooked to an internal temperature of 90 degrees Celsius for a minimum of 90 seconds before consumption.

Public Reporting

Any member of the public can report suspected foodborne gastrointestinal illnesses to their nearest local environmental public health office. A list of these offices and their contact information can be found at the Island Health website [here](#). An environmental health officer will review and investigate all reports.

Island Health Medical Health Officers

Chief MHO: Dr. Réka Gustafson 250-519-3406; North Island: Dr. Charmaine Enns 250-331-8591

Central Island: 250-739-6304; Cowichan Region: Dr. Stéphane Trépanier 250-737-2020

South Island: Dr. Mike Benusic, Dr. Murray Fyfe, Dr. Dee Hoyano, Dr. Christina Kay 250-519-3406

islandhealth.ca/about-us/medical-health-officers