



Fact Sheet

FOOD SAFETY FACTS ON CIGUATERA POISONING

Several illnesses are associated with the consumption of tainted, decomposed or unwholesome fish and fish products, including shellfish. These include illnesses caused by fish which carry bacteria or other microorganisms, and illnesses caused by fish contaminated with marine biotoxins.

Marine biotoxins are a group of natural toxins that sometimes accumulate in fish and shellfish. Many biotoxins are produced by microscopic marine algae (phytoplankton, including diatoms and dinoflagellates) and can accumulate in fish and shellfish if they ingest these algae. These include the toxins that cause Paralytic Shellfish Poisoning and Ciguatera Poisoning.

What is ciguatera poisoning?

- Ciguatera Poisoning is an illness caused by an accumulation of marine biotoxins in fish. These biotoxins originate in a dinoflagellate, or microscopic plant, found mainly in tropical waters.
- Large carnivorous tropical fish (such as barracuda and red snapper) at the top of the food chain accumulate higher concentrations of ciguatera toxins and may pose a greater risk. Most cases of Ciguatera Poisoning are associated with the consumption of these types of fish.
- Any part of an affected fish may contain the ciguatera toxin. However, the liver, head, gonads and viscera have been reported to contain higher concentrations.

What are the symptoms of ciguatera poisoning?

- The symptoms of Ciguatera Poisoning include gastroenteritis, itching of the skin, and central nervous system dysfunction, which often includes hot and cold inversion (e.g. cold foods or drinks are felt as hot and hot foods or drinks are felt as cold; a hot shower feels cold).
- Symptoms usually appear between 1 and 12 hours after consumption and can persist for several months. There is no known effective antidote, but for severe cases, treatment with mannitol or atropine has helped to reduce symptoms.

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Where could I come into contact with Ciguatera Poisoning?

- The most common source of Ciguatera Poisoning is large carnivorous tropical fish, including barracuda, amberjack, red snapper, and grouper.
- Most cases of Ciguatera Poisoning in Canada have been reported by people who ate fish in the Caribbean region while on vacation. A few cases of Ciguatera Poisoning have also been reported in Canada as a result of the consumption of imported tropical fish.

What can I do to protect myself and my family?

- Tropical fish and fish products should only be bought from known, reputable retail outlets.
- Limit the consumption of tropical fish, or avoid eating those parts of tropical fish known to accumulate high levels of ciguatera toxin (i.e. the liver, head, gonads and viscera).
- If you think you have symptoms of Ciguatera Poisoning, consult your physician.

What is the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) doing to protect consumers?

- All importers of fish and fish products into Canada must be licensed with the CFIA.
- Fish and fish products imported into Canada must meet the same requirements applied to domestically produced fish and fish products for compliance with quality and safety standards.
- The CFIA, through the Fish Import Inspection Program, monitors imports of fish and fish products by conducting regular inspections. The frequency of inspection, and the specific analyses conducted, are based on the product type, country of origin and the compliance history of the producer.

For more information on foodborne illness and safe food handling practices, visit the Canadian Food Inspection Agency website at www.inspection.gc.ca