

## Food Safety Alert

### For Food Premises Serving Raw Oysters

*In 2015, BC public health has seen a large increase in the number of people who have eaten raw oysters and gotten sick from **Vibrio parahaemolyticus***

*Vibrio parahaemolyticus* (Vp) is a naturally occurring bacteria present in the ocean. Because the levels of Vp increase in the summer, oysters can sometimes become contaminated. The hot summer that BC has been experiencing has likely been contributing to this problem. After the oysters are harvested, the warmer the temperature that oysters are held at, the more likely that any Vp present in the oyster meat will grow to levels that will make people sick. To reduce the risk that your food premises will serve oysters contaminated with Vp, in addition to basic food safety procedures, here are some specific steps to follow when handling oysters that will be served raw:

- ✓ Only buy oysters from approved suppliers who can provide shellfish tags with each lot. This will make it more likely that the oysters were harvested from open (safe) areas and that the oysters were properly handled after harvesting. Keep the tags for a minimum of 3 months.
- ✓ Always check the temperature of the oysters when you receive them. They must be 4°C or colder. As with any other potentially hazardous food, **if they are warmer than 4°C, REJECT THE SHIPMENT**. They have been temperature abused and are more likely to be contaminated.
- ✓ Store the oysters at 4°C or colder until just prior to preparing them.
- ✓ When preparing oysters, minimize the time they are out of refrigeration. Ideally, oysters for raw consumption are prepared when they are ordered.
- ✓ For customers ordering large numbers of raw oysters, have the server bring the oysters out in smaller numbers and replace them with fresh oysters as they are consumed. This will minimize the time the oysters are held out of refrigeration before being eaten.
- ✓ When presenting raw oysters to customers, do all you can to make sure they remain cold until eaten- many food premises put them on ice and replenish the ice if it melts.

However, even with precautions and good temperature control taken at the food premises, raw oysters are still a high risk food. It is still possible that food premises will receive raw oysters that are already contaminated with Vp. The only effective way to lower this risk is to properly cook the oysters before serving.

For additional information on handling shellfish safely, talk to your Environmental Health Officer or go to <http://www.bccdc.ca/foodhealth/fish/default.htm>