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PSP Biotoxin at Dangerous Levels in Whatcom County

BELLINGHAM, WA — Paralytic shellfish poisoning (PSP) biotoxin has increased to dangerous levels in mussels in Whatcom County, with levels capable of causing illness detected from Lummi Bay north to the Canadian border. Biotoxin levels exceed safe harvest limits for all molluscan shellfish species on all Whatcom County beaches, and recreational harvest of shellfish remains closed by the Washington State Department of Health on all Whatcom County beaches.

"These levels of PSP biotoxin in mussels are very unusual and very concerning. The amount of biotoxin found in some recent samples of mussels is potentially deadly," warns Whatcom County Health Officer, Dr. Greg Stern. "People who consume PSP-contaminated shellfish are risking their lives."

PSP biotoxin causes symptoms including tingling of the lips and tongue, which may begin within minutes of eating toxic shellfish or may take an hour or two to develop. Symptoms may progress to tingling of fingers and toes and then loss of control of arms and legs, followed by difficulty in breathing. Some people feel nauseous or experience a sense of floating. If a person consumes enough toxin, muscles of the chest and abdomen become paralyzed, including muscles used for breathing, and the victim can suffocate. Death from Paralytic Shellfish Poison has occurred in less than 30 minutes. Seek immediate medical attention if you experience any of these symptoms.

Algae that contain marine biotoxins cannot be seen and must be detected by laboratory testing. During a biotoxin event, mussels and varnish clams usually contain the highest toxin concentration. PSP and other naturally occurring biotoxins are not destroyed by cooking or freezing. Crab meat is not affected, but "crab butter" and crab entrails can harbor biotoxins so they should always be discarded.

Shellfish sold in restaurants and retail markets have been tested before distribution and are safe to eat.

Biotoxin levels can change rapidly. Shellfish harvesters should check for current biotoxin and pollution closures at the Washington State Shellfish Safety Map (www.doh.wa.gov/shellfishsafety) or call the DOH Biotoxin Hotline at 1-800-562-5632 before harvesting shellfish anywhere in Washington State.

The Whatcom County Health Department monitors biotoxin levels weekly in coordination with the Washington State Department of Health and will notify the public when there is a change that may affect public health.

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