

Ciguatera Fish Poisoning FACTSHEET

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
Division of Epidemiology, Disease Surveillance and Investigation
899 N. Capitol Street, NE, Suite 580
Washington, D.C. 20002
(202) 442-9371 Fax (202) 442-8060
www.doh.dc.gov

What is Ciguatera Fish Poisoning?

Ciguatera fish poisoning (CFP) is a common foodborne illness caused by eating subtropical and tropical fish that contain toxins produced by a marine microalgae called *Gambierdiscus toxicus*. The *Gambierdiscus toxicus* algae are found primarily in subtropical and tropical areas where it lives on dead corals. The Ciguatera-toxic fish accumulate these toxins naturally through their diet. Ciguatera-toxic fish accumulated these toxins by consuming the algae or by feeding on other fish that have consumed the algae.

How does Ciguatera fish poisoning occur?

Illness occurs after eating contaminated seafood, particularly tropical reef fish such as grouper. It is a concern in places where reef fish consumption is common, such as the Caribbean, southern Florida, Hawaii, the South Pacific, and Australia. There is no evidence of person-to-person transmission. Fifty thousand cases of ciguatera fish poisoning are estimated to occur each year worldwide. Ciguatoxic fish are found on a sporadic basis and not all fish from a given species or location will be toxic.

How soon after exposure does the infection occur?

Illness may occur within 1 to 24 hours after exposure. Gastrointestinal symptoms appear first, accompanied or followed by neurological symptoms up to 2 days later.

What are the symptoms of Ciguatera fish poisoning?

Among healthy people, consumption of fish with ciguatera may experience nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, and neurologic symptoms such as tingling fingers or toes. They also may find that cold things feel hot and hot things feel cold. Ciguatera has no cure. Symptoms usually go away in days or weeks but can last for years. People

who have ciguatera can be treated for their symptoms.

How is the Ciguatera fish poisoning diagnosed?

Ciguatera fish poisoning is diagnosed by stool or food sample cultures. Detection for ciguatera, however, requires specialized analytical methods and/or particular bioassays.

What is the treatment for Ciguatera fish poisoning?

Unfortunately, there is no single specific remedy for the treatment of ciguatera fish poisoning. The most successful management of the disease has been accomplished by supportive and symptomatic treatment such as induced vomiting.

How can Ciguatera fish poisoning be prevented?

- Ciguatoxic fish cannot be detected by appearance, taste or smell. Raw and cooked whole fish, fillets or parts have no signs of spoilage, discoloration or deterioration.
- Avoid or limit the consumption of large reef fish weighing over 6 lbs, especially the highly susceptible species like barracuda, grouper, jack, moray eel, red snapper, sea bass, and sturgeon.
- Avoid consumption of large predatory fish. Ciguatera poisoning is amplified through the food-chain, becoming most concentrated in predatory fish.
- The Ciguatoxin is very heat-stable. Normal household cooking (boiling, steaming, frying) will not reduce or eliminate the toxin.

Want more information?

Information about Ciguatera toxin and Ciguatera fish poisoning and other related health topics can be found at the website www.cdc.gov. The DC Department of Health promotes the health and safety of the District residents. For additional information, please call (202) 442-9371.

