



Wild shellfish collection

What are shellfish?

Seafood such as oysters, mussels, clams, pipis, scallops, cockles, and razorclams are referred to as bivalve molluscs or shellfish. They have a protective shell, and feed by filtering and eating algae and other microscopic organisms in the water.

As a general rule, shellfish do not include crustaceans such as shrimp, prawns, crabs or lobsters.

How can shellfish make you sick?

Shellfish feed by filtering food from the water. They can sometimes accumulate harmful substances in their flesh such as bacteria, viruses, metals, and algal toxins that may be present in the water. These microorganisms and toxins can make people sick if they eat the contaminated flesh.

Symptoms of food poisoning may range from diarrhoea and/or vomiting to severe respiratory and neurological problems, and occasionally even death.

Harmful microorganisms and toxins are often present in waterways (including rivers, lakes, estuaries and the ocean) due to run-off from the land, especially following heavy rainfall.

Can I collect wild shellfish?

It is impossible to guarantee the safety of eating wild shellfish without having a comprehensive monitoring program that tests the waterway concerned for harmful microorganisms and toxins. Such programs are extremely expensive and difficult to undertake.

Consequently, people need to be aware they may be putting their health at risk when collecting and eating wild shellfish.

The Department of Health recommends only eating shellfish harvested commercially under strict monitoring programs.

Do not collect wild shellfish for eating:

- From water known to be affected by an algal bloom. It is important to note however, that not all algal blooms are visible to the naked eye.
- For several days following heavy rainfall.
- From water that has been closed (e.g. due to a sewage overflow). Look for health warning signs along the shoreline.
- From harbours, boat moorings, marinas or ports.
- From offshore wastewater outfall mixing zones. The locations of these mixing zones are available by contacting the Water Corporation on www.watercorporation.com.au or Phone (08) 6364 7600.



What about commercial shellfish?

Shellfish that are commercially available are managed through an accredited quality assurance program, which includes routine testing of the product and the environment they grow in to ensure shellfish are safe for you to eat.

Important facts on shellfish safety

- You may be putting your health at risk when collecting and eating wild shellfish.
- Buy commercial shellfish from reputable and licensed seafood shops.
- Many toxins and other harmful pollutants are not destroyed through cooking.
- Children, people with weakened immune systems and the elderly may be more at risk to food poisoning and should consider this before eating shellfish.
- If food poisoning symptoms occur after eating shellfish, seek medical advice immediately and save any leftover food for possible investigation and laboratory testing.

Safe care of shellfish

- Shellfish is a perishable high risk food and should be stored when cold at 5 degrees Celsius or below and at 60 degrees Celsius and above when hot.
- Never leave out at room temperature unless being consumed, and remember to cover up left-overs promptly and refrigerate as soon as possible.
- Always defrost frozen seafood in the refrigerator or in a microwave oven set on “defrost”.

More Information:

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