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October 2007: Shellfish

Shellfish, like clams, mussels, and oysters, are often consumed raw. Many people pair raw shellfish with some type of alcoholic beverage, and talk about the aphrodisiac qualities of them. (There has not been any scientific basis behind the aphrodisiac qualities of shellfish.)

In addition to being a good food source, the Environmental Protection Agency identifies shellfish as a pollution control technology. Shellfish feed on algae by filtering the ocean water, and consequently remove pollutants from water as well. For this reason, shellfish are often referred to as filter feeders. SeaWeb, a non-profit organization that works towards ocean conservation, claims that "because shellfish are filter feeders they act as natural biofilters in the water, removing phytoplankton, sediments, and organic particles. For example, it is estimated that every kilogram of shellfish meat harvested results in a removal of 16.8 grams of nitrogen." (www.seaweb.org)

Although good for the ocean, this is not good for eating. The pollutants are concentrated in the gut of the shellfish. Oysters are often mentioned as causing illness more than other shellfish because the gut is also consumed raw in the process. Freshness does not guarantee safety because you cannot see, smell, or taste bacteria and viruses.

While healthy people are usually not at risk to many of the illnesses associated with raw shellfish, individuals with medical conditions may become seriously ill and even die. *Vibrio vulnificus* is an example of a bacterium known to kill people. People who drink alcoholic beverages regularly may think that they are healthy but may not notice that their livers are compromised. In addition, diabetes, cancer, stomach disease, or any illness or medical treatment that weakens the body's immune system can also put individuals at high risk for *Vibrio vulnificus* infection.

There is also belief that the summer months are the only time a person can get sick from eating raw shellfish, but according to the Department of Health and Human Service's Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), a full 40 percent of cases occur during colder months from September through April. Many people also feel that seasoning shellfish with hot sauce or vinegar, or drinking alcohol with shellfish, will kill the bacteria, but the FDA only recognizes cooking for killing bacteria.

If you work with shellfish, always check and verify the source of the shellfish and obtain a tag with the type and quantity of shellfish, harvest date, harvest location (including the state name), harvester identification number, and dealer's name, address, and certification number. Make sure to maintain the tags in chronological order for at least 90 days.

Five minutes a day of staff training would make all the difference. Why don't you try various methods to incorporate training into your work day? If you have any questions regarding sanitation or food safety, or require additional information regarding staff training, please feel free to e-mail us.