

# RETAIL FOOD GUIDANCE FOR THE SAFE HANDLING OF SHELLFISH (for retail food establishments)

Prepared by the New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services  
Food and Drug Safety Program - Seafood and Shellfish Project  
June 2010



**QUESTION:**

Why is this specific guidance necessary?

**ANSWER:**

Last year, there was a noticeable increase in illnesses due to a particular bacteria associated with people consuming raw clams and oysters. The name of this bacteria is *Vibrio parahaemolyticus*.

**QUESTION:**

What is *Vibrio parahaemolyticus* (Vp)?

**ANSWER:**

*Vp*, as well as *Vibrio vulnificus* (Vv) bacteria, live naturally in warm marine waters and are in the same family as the bacteria that cause cholera. Reports of illnesses linked to *Vibrio* bacteria commonly intensify between May and August, when bacteria multiply as temperatures increase. Oysters and clams are filter feeders, and as such, concentrate *Vibrio* bacteria in their meat.

Healthy adults who consume raw shellfish usually do not become ill or suffer only mild illness when exposed to *Vibrio*. However, elderly persons, young children,

people with compromised immune systems, and those with chronic illness such as diabetes or liver disease are more likely to develop illness and experience more severe symptoms.

**QUESTION:**

How can retail food establishments help to prevent people from getting sick from *Vibrio*?

**ANSWER:**

All shellfish must be received at 45°F or below and immediately placed under refrigeration. Any shellfish delivery received above 45° is considered temperature abused and should be rejected. **It is important that shellfish are kept cold at refrigeration temperatures below 45°. When temperatures of shellfish rise, *Vibrio* bacteria multiply fast inside the living shellfish!**

In accordance with the Sanitation in Retail Food Establishments and Food and Beverage Vending Machines (Chapter 24) rules, retail food establishments must purchase shellfish from certified dealers only. Retailers can NOT purchase shellfish directly from a harvester. To check if a dealer is certified, please refer to: <http://www.cfsan.fda.gov/~ear/shellfish.html>.

A certified dealer tag must be attached to each bushel, bag, or box of shellfish received. The tag must remain attached to the container until it is completely empty. Retail establishments must retain all tags on site for 90 days.

**QUESTION:**

Does cooking clams and oysters kill the *Vibrio* bacteria?

**ANSWER:**

Yes, if properly cooked. The NJDHSS Food and Drug Safety Program and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration recommends that shellfish in the shell be heated until their shells open, then steamed for an additional 4-9 minutes or boiled for 3-5 minutes. Less thorough cooking could lead to *Vibrio*-related illness in consumers.

Discard any shellfish with open shells, as well as those that do not open during cooking. Use smaller pots to boil or steam shellfish so that heat is evenly distributed and all shellfish are thoroughly cooked. For shucked shellfish, boil or simmer for at least 3 minutes or until the edges curl. Fry at 375°F for at least 3 minutes, broil 3 inches from heat for 3 minutes, or bake at 450°F for 10 minutes.

**QUESTION:**

What about customers who buy raw product directly from us?

**ANSWER:**

Should a consumer purchase raw shellfish to take home, the retail establishment should pack the shellfish in one bag and place on ice by double bagging, or by

placing the product on ice in a proper container. Advise the consumer to place the shellfish into their refrigerator immediately after they come home. It would be helpful to provide a sticker on containers that advises consumers to “KEEP COLD ON ICE OR PLACE IN REFRIGERATION IMMEDIATELY.”

**QUESTION:**

I have a raw bar display at my establishment. Is there anything I should be aware of?

**ANSWER:**

Keep raw shellfish on ice and only display a supply of product that is capable of being maintained at or below 45°F. Do not place a large quantity of product on top of other products because this prevents proper cooling. Check the temperature of the raw bar and the shellfish meat often by using a stem-type thermometer.

For more information, please contact the NJDHSS Food and Drug Safety Program at (609)826-4935. This guide is also available on our website: <http://nj.gov/health/foodanddrugsafety>.

For additional resources, call the FDA’s Food Safety Hotline at 888-SAFEFOOD or go to the FDA’s Center for Food Safety and applied Nutrition (CFSAN) website at: <http://www.cfsan.fda.gov>.

The Food and Drug Safety Program recommends that retail food establishments download additional copies of this guide at the website above and distribute them to their employees who handle shellfish.