

Ciguatera Poisoning Fact Sheet

What is Ciguatera poisoning?

Ciguatera is an illness caused by eating fish contaminated with certain toxins. The ciguatera toxins are produced by a microorganism called *Gambierdiscus toxicus*, which are eaten by small fish, which are eaten by large fish, which are eaten by people. The toxin accumulates and increases in concentration throughout the food chain. Ciguatera is associated with coral reefs and tropical fish, and is not known to contaminate Alaskan fish.

What are the symptoms of Ciguatera?

Symptoms include nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, and stomach pain. Some people have neurological symptoms, which can include strange reactions to feelings of hot and cold temperatures, tingling, odd feelings or pain in the teeth, metallic tastes, and blurred vision. Symptoms usually begin 1-3 hours after eating contaminated fish, but can be delayed longer. Most people get better within a few days, but neurologic symptoms may last for a long time.

Which seafoods pose a ciguatera risk to humans?

Ciguatera toxin is produced by microorganisms that live near coral reefs. So, fish from tropical areas (such as the Caribbean Sea and Indian Ocean) are most likely to be contaminated; however, because fish are shipped across the world, people living anywhere could come in contact with contaminated fish. The fish species most commonly associated with ciguatera are large carnivorous fish, such as barracuda, grouper, moray eel, amberjack, sea bass, and sturgeon. Omnivorous and herbivorous fish such as parrot fish, surgeonfish, and red snapper can also be a risk. Fish local to Alaska are not a risk for ciguatera poisoning because *G. toxicus* doesn't grow here; however, fish from places where *G. toxicus* does grow can easily be purchased in Alaska.

Is the fish safe to eat if I cook it or clean it?

No, ciguatera toxin is not destroyed by cooking or cleaning.

Who is most at risk?

Anyone who eats reef fish is at risk for ciguatera. The ciguatera toxin concentrates more in certain fish species (listed above) and more in certain organs of the fish, including the liver, intestines, head, and eggs. People eating the organs that concentrate toxin of the fish most associated with ciguatera are more at risk than other fish consumers.

How can I tell if fish have ciguatera?

You cannot tell by looking at, smelling, or tasting fish meat if it is contaminated with ciguatera toxin.

How can I protect my family and myself from ciguatera poisoning?

Avoid eating the listed fish, especially barracuda and moray eel, and avoid eating the organs that concentrate toxin.

What should I do if I think that I have ciguatera poisoning?

If symptoms are mild, you can contact your healthcare provider. If symptoms are severe, consider calling 911 or asking someone to take you to a healthcare provider. There is no treatment for ciguatera specifically, but medical care can be helpful. Healthcare providers should **report ciguatera cases to the Section of Epidemiology**.