

Officials say don't eat sports-harvested shellfish

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The California Department of Public Health is advising consumers not to eat sports-harvested mussels, clams or whole scallops from Humboldt and Mendocino counties.

Dangerous levels of domoic acid have been detected in mussels from those areas.

The naturally occurring toxin, also referred to as amnesic shellfish poisoning, and can cause illness or death in humans. Cooking does not destroy the toxin.

A warning against eating sport-harvested razor clams in Del Norte and Humboldt counties also remains in effect, due to continued elevated levels of domoic acid.

The razor clam warning for Del Norte and Humboldt counties has been in effect since Aug. 26, 2015. State health officials said sampling and testing occurs routinely, but the domoic acid levels in those razor clams continue to be above the 20 parts per million (ppm) domoic acid limit.

Due to these levels of domoic acid, the California Department of Fish and Wildlife has instituted a fishery closure for the razor clams in Del Norte and Humboldt counties.

The most recent razor clam data were collected July 30 from Del Norte County and Aug. 3 from Humboldt County.

Sampling is dependent on tidal and weather conditions, as well as sampler availability, officials said. As the fishery is closed, only specific people are allowed to collect razor clams for testing using a Scientific Collecting Permit issued by the state.

Officials said they've seen over the past few years a cycle of domoic acid dosing to the razor clams. A domoic acid event will cause elevated toxin detection in the razor clam meat. Then, there is a gradual decline in toxin levels over the course of a year. But that's followed by another domoic acid toxin event that re-doses the clams before they can clear the toxins to below the limit.

In 2019, the highest levels of domoic acid detected in razor clam meat samples were 280 ppm, or 14 times the limit, collected from Del Norte County in March.

In the most-recent razor clam meat samples from Del Norte County, two out of eight samples were over the 20 ppm domoic acid limit, with the highest level detected of 130 ppm.

Health officials said they could provide no timeline for when the ban on sports razor clams would be lifted, as razor clams retain the domoic acid toxin in their tissues for much longer than other bivalve shellfish (like mussels and other species of clams).

This shellfish safety notification is in addition to an annual mussel quarantine. The annual quarantine applies to all species of mussels harvested along the California coast, as well as in all bays and estuaries, and will continue through at least Oct. 31.

This warning does not apply to commercially sold clams, mussels, scallops or oysters from approved sources. State law permits only state-certified commercial shellfish harvesters or dealers to sell these products.