

## Increase in acute gastrointestinal illness associated with consumption of raw oysters

**Epidemiology:** There has been an increase in the number of acute norovirus and norovirus-like illnesses associated with the consumption of raw oysters in BC. Since November 1, 2024, a total of 64 cases of acute gastrointestinal illness compatible with norovirus has been reported in Vancouver Coastal Health, Fraser Health, and Island Health. Majority of these cases have been reported in the Vancouver Coastal Health region. Almost all cases reported to date have been associated with consumption of raw oysters in restaurants. Presence of norovirus in oysters is almost always due to contamination from ocean waters in the harvest area and not inappropriate handling at the restaurant. To date, five oyster harvest areas have been closed along the BC coast as a result of the ongoing public health investigation.

**Clinical Presentation:** For most people, norovirus illness is self-limited. Symptoms are typically characterized by a sudden onset of abdominal cramping, nausea, vomiting, and/or diarrhea. Other symptoms can include: chills, headache, myalgia, and fever. Individuals at higher risk of more severe illness include: pregnant people, people who are immunocompromised, young children, and adults over the age of 65. The incubation period for norovirus is typically 12-48 hours and illness usually lasts for 24-72 hours.

**Diagnosis and Testing:** For patients who ate raw oysters and are asymptomatic, **testing is not recommended**. These patients should self-monitor for symptoms. For patients who ate raw or undercooked shellfish and develop gastrointestinal symptoms within 48 hours, **testing can be offered**. Testing can be conducted on vomitus by PCR or in the stool through the Infectious Diarrhea Panel (IDP), which has replaced stool cultures and stool O&Ps. Collect vomitus or stool in sterile sample containers. Additional details about the IDP can be found by consulting [Infectious Diarrhea Guidelines \(https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/health/practitioner-professional-resources/bc-guidelines/infectious-diarrhea-guideline-for-investigation#key\)](https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/health/practitioner-professional-resources/bc-guidelines/infectious-diarrhea-guideline-for-investigation#key).

**Treatment:** For most patients, treatment is supportive. No antimicrobial agents are recommended for the management of norovirus illness.

**Prevention:** Norovirus is highly contagious. Individuals with gastrointestinal illness should follow good hand hygiene and avoid food preparation and food handling for others until at least 48 hours after symptom resolution. High touch and contaminated surfaces should be cleaned and disinfected with chlorine bleach. Patients can reduce their risk of exposure to norovirus by avoiding the consumption of raw or undercooked oysters and shellfish. It is recommended to cook oysters to an internal temperature of 90° Celsius for a minimum of 90 seconds.

**Reporting:** Clinicians should maintain a high index of suspicion for norovirus illness for people who have consumed raw oysters and present with the symptoms described above. Foodborne gastrointestinal illnesses can be self-reported by patients to VCH Public Health through the [Health Protection Feedback Form \(https://www.vch.ca/en/about-us/contact-us/compliments-and-complaints/health-protection-feedback\)](https://www.vch.ca/en/about-us/contact-us/compliments-and-complaints/health-protection-feedback). Patients who have consumed raw or undercooked shellfish and have symptoms compatible with norovirus or norovirus-like illness can self-report through this form. An environmental health officer (EHO) will be in contact to gather more information which can help identify potential oyster harvest sites for further investigation.

You can reach a Medical Health Officer at 604.675.3900 | Toll free at 1.855.675.3900 For public health emergencies after hours, contact the Medical Health Officer on call at 604.527.4893

### Vancouver Coastal Health Medical Health Officers

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