

Interstate Shellfish Sanitation Conference
POLICY STATEMENT
CONSUMPTION OF RAW MOLLUSCAN SHELLFISH

Introduction

The Interstate Shellfish Sanitation Conference (ISSC) was organized in 1982 to address the safety and sanitation of molluscan shellfish (oysters, mussels, clams, and whole and roe-on scallops. The ISSC has a formal Memorandum of Understanding with the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to promote shellfish sanitation through the National Shellfish Sanitation Program (NSSP), a tripartite cooperative program of Federal and State public health officials and the shellfish industry working together to improve shellfish safety. The ISSC recognizes the success of this Program, which is founded on the premise that through appropriate controls, molluscan shellfish can be consumed raw by most people with reasonable risk. The ISSC remains committed to that premise.

Policy Statement

Molluscan shellfish are animal-derived protein foods that are widely consumed and play an important role in the diets of some consumers. Most animal-derived protein foods are cooked prior to consumption. Cooking can reduce a number of potentially pathogenic organisms and the risk of illness. Consumption of raw shellfish, as with consumption of other types of raw animal-derived protein foods, increases the risk of illness. The majority of illnesses related to the consumption of raw molluscan shellfish are a result of pollution. These illnesses are not life threatening to the general population and commonly range from mild intestinal disorders of short duration to acute gastroenteritis. More serious illnesses can occur, but are rare.

To reduce the potential risk associated with consumption of raw molluscan shellfish, the FDA in cooperation with the States administers the National Shellfish Sanitation Program. States monitor shellfish growing waters to determine that they are safe before harvesting is permitted. The FDA routinely audits the States' classification of shellfish harvesting areas to verify that none pose a threat to public health. The FDA has also increased its cooperative efforts with State and Federal law enforcement officers to prevent illegal harvesting from closed waters and ensures that all shellfish in interstate commerce are properly labeled or has a tag identifying the harvest area and shipper. The tagging and labeling requirement of the NSSP is designed to ensure that only shellfish from approved growing waters reach interstate commerce. Adherence to NSSP controls minimizes risks. Recognizing the NSSP partnership provides the best possible means of ensuring that molluscan shellfish are safe, the FDA, the States, and the ISSC are committed to continued support of the Program.

Certain medically compromised individuals are at increased risk from common marine bacteria that are unrelated to pollution. Therefore, it may not be possible to address this risk through environmental controls. Although the reported number of illnesses and fatalities from these bacteria in the United States each year is small in comparison with other food borne illnesses, total abstinence from raw molluscan shellfish is the best advice for medically compromised individuals. Those at greatest risk include, but are not restricted to those affected by: AIDS; chronic alcohol abuse; liver, stomach or blood disorders; cancer, diabetes and kidney disease. Those uncertain of their health status should seek the advice of their physician.