2 dead from flesh-eating bacteria; other cases suspected

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NEW ORLEANS — For some people, eating raw oysters is Russian roulette. But most don’t have to worry about whether a dozen on the half-shell carry the flesh-eating bacteria called Vibrio vulnificus.

As temperatures rise, so do the numbers of Vibrio vulnificus in brackish or ocean waters. They grow there naturally, and sometimes they kill.

So far this year, two people in Louisiana and Mississippi have died from the bacteria. A second Louisiana man is recovering and another case is suspected.

People can get infected either by eating raw seafood or getting the germs in a cut, blister or other wound.

But most people can still enjoy raw oysters and wading in the Gulf of Mexico, Dr. Charles Sanders, chairman of the department of medicine at LSU Medical Center, and other doctors emphasized.

“We need to get away from this hysteria,” Sanders said.

Karl Turner of the Louisiana Seafood Promotion Marketing Board figures that since 1985, there has been less than one case per 25 million Louisiana oysters eaten.

So far this year, two cases have been confirmed in Louisiana, and a possible case is being investigated, said Dr. Tom Farley, an epidemiologist in the state Office of Public Health.

He said one of the confirmed cases was fatal. But he would not comment on a report that the death was that of U.S. District Judge Patrick E. Curr, 75.

The other was Adam Duhe, 74, of Reserve, who is finally getting out of Memorial Medical Center in New Orleans after nearly three weeks in hospitals, four operations on his left hand and arm, and plastic surgery.

Duhe said the suspected case is a friend of his. The other man’s arm had to be amputated last week, he said.

The death rate is about 45 percent for people infected by eating shellfish, about 25 percent for those infected through skin wounds.

Several years ago, Sanders said, an oyster
Bacteria

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ter shucker came to Charity Hospital, his left arm red and swollen to the elbow. He'd slipped and punctured his hand with an oyster knife 24 to 36 hours earlier. Taking off the arm at the shoulder didn't save him — the infection already had spread throughout his body.

Duhe, whose diabetes may have weakened his immune system, thinks he probably was pricked by a shrimp shell during a shrimp processing trip. He came down with chills hours after the afternoon trip. The next morning, his arm was swollen almost to the elbow, with blood blisters on his wrist. Vulturicousus means “inflicting wounds.” It produces enzymes that digest muscle and other soft tissue.

With most other germs, skin infections are superficial. “This goes deep, going into ... the covering of the muscle — and into the muscle itself,” Sanders said. Other symptoms can include huge red swellings, big blood blisters, diarrhea, fever, chills, vomiting and shock.

Anyone who eats uncooked seafood or dips a nicked finger into seawater is probably exposed to Vibrio vulnificus. In 1996, a 61-year-old Alabama woman died two days after a crab pinched her while she was cleaning it for a gumbo dinner. Most of us shrug it off. Our immune systems wipe out its invasion of our blood. Sanders said he suspects but hasn't proven that stomach acid kills the germ in food.

But people whose stomach, liver or immune system is in poor shape don't have that protection. That can include heavy drinkers who don't know they have liver problems and people on chemotherapy. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration also warns people taking antacids to avoid raw oysters. About 30 to 50 cases are reported a year, most among people above the age of 45, said Dr. George Pankey, an Ochsner Clinic consultant who described the first Louisiana case in 1971.

It's not a function of age itself. Older people are more likely to have the medical problems that make anyone susceptible to the bacteria, often without knowing it. For instance, after a Gulfport man died in April, Mississippi health officials said he had a liver problem. His family hadn't known of any, though his wife said he regularly drank alcoholic beverages.

Pankey said he'd recommend that anyone susceptible to the disease wear gloves to handle shrimp or crabs, or when cleaning out the bottom of a boat.

"I don't really use gloves," Duhe said. He said his doctor told him there was little chance of a second infection. "He said it's like winning the lottery two weeks in a row if I ever get it again."

The chance is low, but not one anyone should take, Pankey said. "I think the message you want to give is you want to be cautious."

Duhe said he would take other precautions: "I'm going to do most of my fishing in the winter-time, when the bacteria isn't in the water." That's no guarantee, Pankey said. "There's still cases in what we would consider colder months."

Oyster woes

Conditions which make Vibrio vulnificus dangerous:

- Liver disease
- Diabetes
- Stomach problems, including previous stomach surgery and low stomach acid from antacid use
- Cancer
- Immune disorders, including HIV infection
- Long-term steroid use for asthma and arthritis
- Hemochromatosis, an iron disorder
- The elderly, because they are more prone to the above conditions, which sometimes have no symptoms
- People who regularly drink alcohol, because those who consume as little as two to three drinks a day may be at risk for undiagnosed liver disease

For information, call the FDA Food and Nutrition Hot Line at 1-800-FDA-4010, or check its web site: www.fda.gov.

SOURCE: U.S. Food and Drug Administration

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 Advocate graphic