



We are noticing a number of alleged **food poisoning cases** where oysters have been consumed, and at the end of last year there were **recall of oysters** because of possible **contamination with norovirus**. Data appears to show an increase in the number of people, in the UK, with norovirus infections linked to eating raw oysters, especially during the Winter and around February, so here is a timely reminder to ensure you serve oysters as safely as possible.

Unlike most other animal-based products that you buy such as meat, fish and poultry; oysters (and some other live bivalve molluscs and shellfish) are usually live when you purchase them and they must be kept alive until you prepare/cook/serve them.

In the UK, an estimated **12,000-14,000 people per year experience sickness and diarrhoea after eating seafood**, usually raw oysters. It is estimated that over 13 million oyster meals are served in the UK annually, many of them consumed raw, so whilst the odds of contracting norovirus from eating raw oysters are relatively low, it is a very unpleasant illness and highly transmissible with as few as 10 viral particles required to cause illness.¹

Oysters filter large volumes of water to get their food and, so can be exposed to noroviruses when human sewage enters their growing areas. The oysters can then be vehicles of disease. Symptoms caused by norovirus typically include sudden onset nausea, projectile vomiting, diarrhoea and fever but can also include abdominal pain and aching limbs.

So what can you do to help prevent cases and outbreaks when you serve oysters?

Supplier Management

- Good supplier management is key and you must only purchase from reputable suppliers. Reputable suppliers will be able to provide you with evidence that the shell fish has been harvested from classified shellfish beds and have been purified.
- The FSA assess and classify production and relaying areas by assessing pollution levels. They also monitor biotoxins to identify if there is an increased risk of shellfish becoming contaminated.
- When biotoxins in shellfish are detected over the legal limit we and your Local Authority take action to ensure the affected areas are closed for harvesting.
- Make sure your supplier uses Category A or B shellfish beds (as these are the ones allowed for human consumption).
- If you are planning to serve oysters raw, make sure your supplier can prove that they have undergone depuration for over 42 hours (placing shellfish into a purpose made tank which is then filled with clean seawater. In the UK, seawater is treated by ultraviolet (UV) disinfection prior to purification to prevent possible contamination of shellfish during the process). This is a legal requirement for Cat. B oysters but is also done by many suppliers of Cat. A oysters and it is recommended that it is. Your suppliers should be able to provide you with paperwork/ a specification showing that oysters have undergone depuration.
- Oysters must be tested to ensure they meet certain E. coli criteria, but some suppliers also monitor for norovirus and you should check that regular norovirus tests alongside E.coli tests are being carried out.
- You must receive traceability information with every delivery and this is in the form of a water-resistant health mark label that should show an ID number of the source, the batch number and a statement '*these animals must be alive when sold*'.
- You should retain these labels for at least 60 days and the easiest way to do this is to staple the label into a large diary (in a non-food area to avoid contaminating food with staples) on the day of delivery or date they are used for service.
- Try to avoid using oysters from different suppliers at the same time but, if this is unavoidable, you should devise a method of being able to identify who ate oysters from which supplier.
- Check oysters on delivery – Check the health mark and reject the consignment if not available. Fresh oysters will close when you tap the shell and oysters should smell clean and like the sea. Shells should be undamaged as damaged shells allows the liquid that keeps them fresh to drain out. Suppliers should deliver in clean refrigerated vehicles.
- Verify and record the delivery temperature of oysters
- Put the oysters away immediately.

Safe storage of oysters

- Ensure that you keep the accompanying documentation and health marks.
- Place them in a deep bowl or tray with the curved shell side downwards and do not stack them.
- Cover them in a damp clean towel or cloth and place in the fridge between 4°C and 8°C (temperatures of 1°C or lower (especially freezing temperatures less than 0°C) can kill shellfish).
- Do not store on ice or place in water or in a sealed container/bag as this can kill them.
- If stored correctly the oysters should last at least 5 days from date of harvest but it is generally best to eat them as soon as possible.
- Dead oysters must not be eaten.

Shucking Oysters

- Shucking is removal of the meat from the shell or detachment of the meat so that it can be readily removed by the consumer.
- Only chefs trained to shuck oysters should do this.
- Avoid pushing anything such as mud or pieces of shell into the oyster as it is opened
- Hands must be washed before opening oysters and ensure gloves and other equipment are clean and sanitised.
- Throw the oyster away if the meat or liquor looks cloudy, brown, grey, blackish or reddish, or it smells unpleasant.
- A clean and sanitised shucking knife should be used between batches to prevent cross contamination.

Service

- Oysters should be served quickly after shucking and shucked as close to service as possible.
- It is advised that guests avoid drinking spirits when eating oysters.
- Remember oysters are shellfish and one of the 14 allergens falling into the mollusc category. Always ensure allergen information is accurate and available.
- Whilst oysters can be served raw, they can also be cooked and if heated to above 75°C or equivalent, they will be much safer to serve.

The Food Alert Oyster HACCP is available in specialised HACCPs in Alert65. Please do contact our Advice Line if you require further advice and guidance.

<https://marinescience.blog.gov.uk/2021/08/26/shellfish-sleuths-foodborne-virus-outbreak-investigations/>