

Algae in the Gippsland Lakes (*Pseudonitzschia delicatissima*)

Community information

The Chief Health Officer has advised against eating mussels and other shellfish from the Gippsland Lakes while further testing continues to identify any public health risk.

This advice follows detection of high levels of *Pseudonitzschia delicatissima* in water samples at Eagle Point, Paynesville and Metung in the Gippsland Lakes.

What is the issue?

Pseudonitzschia delicatissima is a diatom algae commonly found in coastal waters at low levels. Some forms of this algae may produce a toxin known as domoic acid.

High levels of this algae have been detected in water in the Gippsland Lakes and is uncommon, with the last significant bloom occurring twenty years ago. This is not the same as blue-green algae and is less likely to pose a risk to public health.

Where toxin producing *Pseudonitzschia* species are present at these high levels, it is possible for this toxin to accumulate in shellfish at a level that may be potentially harmful to human health.

How has the government responded?

A co-ordinated response between government agencies is underway to determine whether the species found is a toxin-producing species. This will involve further water testing and testing of seafood.

While toxin-producing strains of this algae appear to be much less common in Australia than overseas, as a precautionary measure, the Chief Health Officer has advised that the consumption of mussels and other shellfish from the Gippsland Lakes should be avoided until testing results can confirm they are safe to eat.

How does *Pseudonitzchia* enter the food chain?

Some, but not all *Pseudonitzschia delicatissima* species produce a toxin called domoic acid. If seafood consume this algae, the toxin can accumulate and cause illness in people who consume it. Mussels and other shellfish are most likely to accumulate this toxin because they are 'filter feeders'.

What are the health impacts?

If anyone has consumed mussels containing the toxin from the Gippsland Lakes, they may experience gastroenteritis-like symptoms (usually 24 hrs after consumption) such as nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea and abdominal cramps. In this case, see your doctor.

In severe cases, neurological symptoms may develop (usually 48 hrs after consumption) such as headaches, confusion, short term memory loss (amnesic shellfish poisoning), breathing difficulties and seizures. Seek immediate medical attention.

Which seafood should be avoided?

This advisory does not include fish as they are less likely to accumulate toxins. Filter feeders such as mussels, scallops and oysters should be avoided until further advised.

If these shellfish have already been collected, it's important to note that the toxin is not destroyed by freezing or cooking, so they should be discarded.

If I've eaten these shellfish, what should I do?

Symptoms usually develop 24 hours after consumption. If you or someone in your care develops any of the symptoms noted, seek medical advice.

Is it safe to come in contact with water on the Gippsland Lakes?

Swimming and other recreational activities are safe. Skin contact or swallowing small amounts of seawater containing this algae does not present a health risk.

More information

For more information about this algae bloom, contact the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning on 136 186.

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