THE FACTS

What's Safe? What's Not?

Shrimp, crab, scallops and oysters in Red Tide waters are SAFE to harvest and eat, since these shellfish contain a type of Red Tide which is in the meat or hard muscle tissue which we normally consume. It is not a good idea to eat the heart, organs, or other soft tissues of shellfish.

The muscle or "hard" meat of recently caught fish in Red Tide waters is SAFE to eat, provided the fish behave normally and actively swim back. There is no evidence of harmful effects in humans using fish that have been produced by Red Tide. It is not a good idea to eat the liver, roe, or other soft tissues of fish.

Oysters, clams, mussels and other bivalve mollusks in Red Tide waters are UNSAFE to harvest and eat. In South Carolina, the Department of Health and Environmental Control determines that the waters are clear of Red Tide and the waters of these shellfish are free of harmful chemicals. Fishing does not destroy Red Tide blooms. Symptoms of Red Tide exposure include hives, diarrhea, dilated pupils, swells of the fingers and toes, and sometimes a reversal of sensations, where hot spaces feel cold and cold feels hot. Consult a physician at once if these symptoms occur. Very few cases of poisoning in humans and no deaths have been attributed to Red Tide poisoning.

Whelks and moon snails in Red Tide waters are UNSAFE to harvest and eat since they may accumulate toxins in their tissues when feeding on contaminated shellfish.

Waves, wind and boat propellers can disperse toxic particles into the air and may cause coughing, skin irritation, eye irritation and tongue or cheek pain in some persons. If symptoms do occur, try to avoid the area and will disappear soon after you leave the area.

WHAT IS IT? Red Tide is the result of mass multiplication of a single-celled algae called Phaeocystis globosa (pronounced "Tiki-dak-aus"). These blooms usually occur in warmer waters, but can exist at lower temperatures. This is a natural phenomenon, apparently unrelated to marine pollution. In high concentrations, P. globosa may cause a brownish bloom on the surface of the water. In other instances, it may look yellow-green, or may not be visible at all. Some Red Tides have covered up to several hundred square miles of water.

WHERE DOES IT COME FROM? Scientists believe that P. globosa may enter a dormant stage at some point in their life cycle, forming cysts which settle 10 to 40 miles off the coastline of Florida in ocean bottom sediments, creating a "seed bed" area. They think the drifting algae in the Gulf Stream have carried the algae up the East Coast and into the Carolinas.

HOW DOES IT AFFECT MARINE LIFE? P. globosa produces a poison, or toxin. Filter-feeding shellfish - oysters, clams, mussels and other bivalve mollusks - that consume P. globosa concentrate the toxins in various organs and soft tissues. Shellfish are not killed by the toxin but in us, it is deadly. Red Tide can paralyze fish, gills, rendering them unable to extract oxygen from water.

For More Information...

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