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EXTREMELY DANGEROUS BIOTOXIN LEVELS DETECTED IN SHELLFISH THROUGHOUT WHATCOM COUNTY

WHATCOM COUNTY – Marine biotoxins that cause paralytic shellfish poisoning (PSP) have been detected at potentially lethal levels in all areas of Whatcom County. Samples from Squalicum Harbor and Birch Bay have risen to potentially lethal levels in the past week. Extremely high PSP toxin levels are still present in shellfish sampled from Drayton Harbor, Semiahmoo and Point Roberts.

All of Whatcom County has been closed to the recreational harvest of molluscan shellfish since early June. The Health Department warns the public that consumption of molluscan shellfish with such high toxin levels is potentially lethal. The Whatcom County Health Department will continue to test local beaches and will notify the public when shellfish are safe to harvest again.

Molluscan shellfish that are sold in permitted retail markets are harvested from locations that are tested at the time of harvest and are proven safe to eat.

The closure includes clams, oysters, mussels, scallops, geoducks and other species of molluscan shellfish. Crab is not included in the closure, but “crab butter” and crab entrails should be discarded, and only the meat should be eaten. PSP biotoxins are naturally occurring and are not destroyed by cooking or freezing.

PSP intoxication can be life-threatening. Symptoms of PSP can appear within minutes or hours and usually begin with tingling lips and tongue, moving to the hands and feet, followed by difficulty breathing, and potentially death. If you experience these symptoms contact a health care provider. For extreme reactions call 911.

People can become ill after eating Shellfish contaminated with the toxins produced by naturally occurring marine algae. In most cases the algae that contain the toxins cannot be seen, and must be detected using laboratory testing. Therefore, recreational shellfish harvesters should check the DOH website at <http://www.doh.wa.gov/ehp/sf/biotxin.htm> or call the DOH Biotxin **Hotline** at **1-800-562-5632** before harvesting shellfish anywhere in Washington State.

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