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Researchers Find Even Higher Algal Levels In Regional Waters

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By Diana Haecker

After alerting the region to very high levels of harmful algal blooms west of Kotzebue and Gambell two weeks ago, scientist onboard the research vessel Norseman II have found even higher numbers of Alexandrium catenella algae cells near Wales, Diomedea and Shishmaref. According to a press release from Norton Sound Health Corporation, the Norseman II traveled near Wales on August 18 to collect seawater samples. Closest to Wales, the samples indicated a concentration of the Alexandrium catenella alga at over 1,000 cells per liter. About 15 miles away to the south, the vessel detected high levels of concentration of the algae with 55,000 cells per liter.

On Friday, August 19, the same vessel traveled near the Diomedea islands and collected a water sample with extremely high concentration of the algae, with over 100,000 cells per liter of seawater, while 1.5 miles from the islands.

On Saturday, August 20, the research team sampled about 20 miles outside of Shishmaref, where they found a concentration of over 20,000 cells per liter.

According to Don Anderson, a senior scientist with the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, entire coastlines are closed to shellfish harvesting on the Eastern Seaboard when more than 1,000 Alexandrium cells are detected per liter.

The Alexandrium catenella alga is a phytoplankton that can produce saxitoxins, which, if consumed, can cause paralytic shellfish poisoning. PSP affects the nervous system and blocks nerve function. If high concentrations of saxitoxin are eaten, breathing difficulties and paralysis occurs in humans, marine mammals and seabirds. Alaska Sea Grant also reports that consuming walrus intestine, stomach, and their contents in areas with known biotoxins likely has the same risk as consuming shellfish from those areas. People cannot see, smell, or taste algae toxins. Cooking or freezing these foods will not lessen the toxin's effect.

According to a PSP fact sheet from the Alaska Division of Public Health, early symptoms of PSP include tingling of the lips and tongue, which may begin within minutes of eating toxic shellfish or may take an hour or two to develop. Symptoms may progress to tingling of fingers and toes and then the loss of muscle control in the arms and legs, followed by difficulty in breathing. Some people have experienced a sense of floating or nausea. Muscles of the chest and abdomen may become paralyzed. With high toxin exposures, death can occur in as little as two hours from paralysis of the breathing muscles. What is the treatment?

According to the fact sheet, there is no antidote for PSP toxins, but supportive medical care can be lifesaving. Persons whose breathing muscles become paralyzed can be put on a mechanical respirator and given oxygen to help them breathe, and people who develop abnormal heartrhythms can be given medications to stabilize their heart rhythm. The only way to protect your family and yourself from PSP is by not eating noncommercial shellfish collected from beaches in Alaska, says the factsheet.

NSHC urges that if you feel sick from eating clams or other shellfish, contact your health care provider immediately.

If you see any marine wildlife, including walruses, acting in an unusual manner or dead in the Bering Strait region, please contact the following: UAF Alaska Sea Grant, Gay Sheffield: (907) 434-1149; Kawerak, Subsistence, Brandon Ahmasuk: (907) 443-4265; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) Marine Mammals Management: 1-800-362-5148; Alaska Marine Mammal Stranding Network: (877) 925-7773.

https://health.alaska.gov/dph/Epi/id/SiteAssets/Pages/Shellfish%20Poisoning%20Resources/PSP_fa

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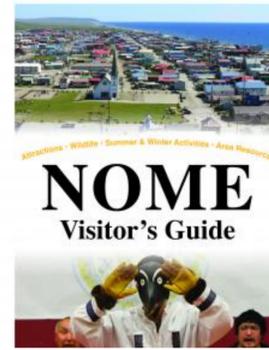
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December 22, 2022



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9 °F	19 °F	

14 18	10 15	7 16	7 15
THU	FRI	SAT	SUN

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