

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

About suspected Conch (*Strombus gigas*) Poisoning

Released by The Bahamas Agricultural Health and Food Safety Authority (BAHFSA)

In Collaboration with the Ministry of Health (MOH) & the Department of Environmental Health Services (DEHS)

1. What causes conch poisoning?

Ans. Conch poisoning is typically caused by *Vibrio parahaemolyticus*, a bacterium which thrives in salt water and in water temperatures above 15-20°C (59-68°F).

2. What are the risks associated with eating raw conch?

Ans. The main risk is food poisoning, which stems from improper handling, preparation and storage of the conch.

3. How should conch be prepared and at what temperature should it be cooked to ensure the *V. parahaemolyticus* pathogen has been destroyed?

Ans. To avoid conch poisoning, persons should avoid eating raw conch. When cooking conch, it should first be washed thoroughly under running, potable (fresh) tap water with intense rubbing of its surface to remove any slime and debris. The slime is where the bacteria lives and may pose a health risk to consumers if it is not effectively removed. The conch can then be cooked at a temperature of 100°C (212°F) for more than 10min to destroy any pathogens that may be present.

4. How long does it take for the symptoms of conch poisoning to start and how long does it last?

Ans. Conch poisoning symptoms usually occur 3-24 hours after consuming contaminated conch and sometimes as late as 4-5 days after. The illness may last for about 72 hours but can be prolonged up to 10 days in persons with weakened immune systems.

5. What types of symptoms should I look for if I suspect I am suffering from conch poisoning?

Ans. With conch poisoning, persons typically have diarrhea (with or without blood), nausea, abdominal pain, fever and vomiting.

6. Can I die from conch poisoning?

Ans. *Vibrio parahaemolyticus* infections are usually self-limiting, with treatment not typically being necessary. In severe cases, fluid and electrolyte replacement is advised. Dying from conch poisoning is, however, unlikely.

7. Who should avoid or never eat raw conch or conch that is partially cooked?

Ans. The elderly (65 and older), small children (less than 5yrs. old), pregnant women and individuals with weakened immune systems due to poor health, e.g., those suffering from diabetes, liver or kidney disease, cancer and/or HIV/AIDS.

8. Where do I go if I fall ill after consuming a conch dish?

Ans. If you suspect you have conch poisoning and you are experiencing any of the symptoms in #5, call your health care provider or local community clinic for advice and guidance.

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- 9. If I see my private Doctor due to a foodborne illness, are they required to report my case to the Public Hospital Authority?**

Ans. Any physician or health care provider who treats a person for suspected conch poisoning or gastroenteritis, is mandated by law (Public Health Act, 1914) to report the same to the Surveillance Unit at the Ministry of Health.

- 10. What can I take to ease the symptoms if I believe I'm suffering from conch poisoning?**

Ans. Persons are advised to stay hydrated as there is no specific cure for conch poisoning. In addition, one should make plans to seek medical attention if symptoms are persistent and become worse.

- 11. Will any samples be taken during my visit to the Doctor due to my conch poisoning?**

Ans. Certainly. It is critical that stool samples be provided so that the pathogen can be tested and identified, so be prepared.

- 12. What agency is responsible for reporting a conch poisoning outbreak and providing updates to the public?**

Ans. The Bahamas Agricultural Health and Food Safety Authority (BAHFSA) takes the lead in reporting a conch poisoning or any type of food poisoning to the public while working collaboratively with the Ministry of Health, the Department of Environmental Health Services and the Ministry of Agriculture and Marine Resources.

- 13. Where can I find a public clinic or hospital that is close to my residence to receive treatment if I suspect that I got food poisoning from eating conch?**

Ans. There are a number of clinics throughout the country where treatment for conch poisoning can be sought. Visit the Ministry of Health on The Bahamas Government website for a link to public clinics on New Providence and the Family Islands. Persons may also seek medical attention at the Princess Margaret Hospital on New Providence or The Rand Memorial Hospital on Grand Bahama.

- 14. I am a visitor to The Bahamas and I just got a bout of food poisoning from eating conch. What do I do?**

Ans. Keep hydrated and contact the nearest health care facility for advice and guidance, i.e., treatment and to record the incident and if necessary, provide a sample for testing.

- 15. How do I know if my food poisoning from consuming conch is serious?**

Ans. If you experience the following, seek medical attention immediately: A high fever ($\geq 102^{\circ}\text{F}$), persistent vomiting, dry throat, little to no urine, dizziness, bloody stools and/or constant diarrhea lasting for over 48 hours.

THE BAHAMAS AGRICULTURAL HEALTH & FOOD
SAFETY AUTHORITY