

Safety Zone: Oyster Bars

Oyster bars are specialized restaurants that offer oysters prepared in various ways. They are also known as raw bars, oyster houses or oyster saloons. Oysters may also be served as an integrated food item at other restaurants, hotel bars, or other eating and drinking places.

Oyster is a common name for several different families of saltwater clams, bivalve mollusks that live in marine or brackish habitats. Some kinds of oysters are commonly consumed, cooked or raw, as a delicacy. True oysters are members of the family Ostreidae. This family includes the edible oysters, which mainly belong to the genera *Ostrea*, *Crassostrea*, *Ostreola*, and *Saccostrea*. Examples include the Belon Oyster, Easter Oyster, Olympia Oyster, Pacific Oyster, and the Sydney Rock Oyster.

The five oyster species harvested in the U.S. are the Pacific Oyster, Kumamoto, Eastern (or Atlantic) Oyster varieties (such as Wellfleets, Blue Point, Apalachicola and others), European Flats (also known as Belon), and Olympia Oysters.

Exposure

Raw oysters are delicious, nutrient-rich and low in calories. They have been a sought-after delicacy throughout history, but this niche industry is surging in popularity across the U.S. However, consuming raw oysters and other shellfish can put patrons and employees at risk of foodborne illnesses from *Vibrio* infections.

Vibrio is a class of bacteria that naturally occurs in many coastal waters from which oysters are harvested. These bacterial concentrations increase in warmer months usually, between May and October, accounting for about 80% of human infections. Various types of *Vibrio* can cause illness, most often from eating raw or undercooked shellfish, particularly oysters. It can also enter the body through an open wound exposed to saltwater or brackish water. The CDC estimates about 80,000 illnesses a year in the U.S., with 52,000 coming from *Vibrio*-contaminated food.

Those most at risk for infection or severe complications from *Vibrio* are those with:

- Liver disease, cancer, diabetes, HIV, or thalassemia
- Receive immune-suppressing therapy for the treatment of disease
- Take medicine to decrease stomach acid levels
- Have had recent stomach surgery

Most people with mild cases, such as those from *Vibrio parahaemolyticus*, recover in around three days without lingering effects. But those with a *Vibrio vulnificus* infection can face serious illness, hospitalization, limb amputation and death. About one in five people with this type of infection die, accounting for about 100 fatalities annually. Though rare, these events can be financially disruptive for business owners facing these types of claims and the accompanying publicity and reputational harm. Workers' compensation could also



come into play if employees handling or shucking oysters are sickened by raw seafood or raw seafood juices entering wounds or cuts.

Loss Control

1. All raw oysters served must undergo post-harvest processing (PHP). These methods can reduce *Vibrio* bacteria to non-detectable levels.

Additionally, [post-harvest production](#) kills spoilage bacteria, thereby extending shelf life and maintaining freshness and quality. Three technologies are currently used: individual quick freezing, heat-cool pasteurization, and high hydrostatic pressure. However, because these processes may not kill all bacteria and viruses, it is recommended that high-risk patients do not eat raw, post-harvest processed oysters.

Post-Harvest Production oysters are tagged with a blue oyster tag. When the tag is BLUE, it means that the bacterial *V. vulnificus* has been reduced to non-detectable levels.

2. Raw food warnings should be included in both menus and on-premises. Some food service establishments have specific guidelines and wording.

Sample:*

There is a risk associated with consuming raw oysters. If you have chronic illness of the liver, stomach or blood, or have immune disorders, you are at greater risk of serious illness from raw oysters and should eat oysters fully cooked. If unsure of your risk, consult a physician.

*Sample wording is for illustration only. Seek appropriate professional advice in your jurisdiction for your purpose

3. Required raw oyster documentation must be followed. Raw shucked shellfish shall be obtained in containers/sacks, which are:

- Labeled with the name, address, and certification number of the shucker/packer or re-packer of the shucked shellfish; and
- A “sell-by” date on containers less than ½ gallon in size, or a “shucked” date on containers ½ gallon or more in size.
- The sack should be in good condition.
- Sacks should be refrigerated upon receiving.

Tags and Label Retention

- The tags or labels attached to a shellfish container must be kept attached to the container until it is empty.
- All food service establishments must keep shellfish tags or labels on file for a minimum of 90 days.
- Use a record-keeping system that keeps the tags or labels in chronological order and allows you to correlate to the date when the shellstock is sold or served.

The shellstock tagging and retention requirement is designed to help regulatory authorities trace shellstock back to its original source. If a foodborne illness outbreak occurs, the tags are required to help regulatory authorities move quickly to close the affected growing areas or take other appropriate actions to prevent additional illnesses.

4. Raw oyster/shellfish handling procedures must be followed.

- Product should be refrigerated.
- Product should be stored at least 6” off the floor.
- The shells of previously shucked oysters may not be reused.
- Proper equipment sanitation.
- Require employees to always wash hands with soap and water after handling raw oysters and shellfish.
- Put procedures in place to prevent contaminating cooked foods with raw oysters and shellfish and their juices.
- Require employees to wash wounds and cuts thoroughly with soap and water after contact with raw oysters or their juices.

Additional Resources

<https://www.cdc.gov/vibrio/vibrio-oysters.html>

<https://www.fda.gov/food/health-educators/raw-oyster-myths>

For additional information and resources on this topic and other safety and risk management subjects, be sure to visit the Loss Control section on our website: <https://amtrustfinancial.com/loss-control>

Contact Info:

PHONE: 888.486.7466

WEB: amtrustfinancial.com/loss-control

EMAIL: AskLC@amtrustgroup.com

AmTrust maintains this article as a service for its customers. This information is intended to give you a place to start when finding information about a particular safety question. This article is not intended to provide authoritative answers to safety and health questions. Before using the information here, the accuracy and appropriateness of the information to your specific situation should be verified by a person qualified to assess all the factors involved.

This article contains hyperlinks to information created and maintained by other public and private organizations. Please be aware that we do not control or guarantee the accuracy, relevance, timeliness or completeness of this outside information. Further, the inclusion of pointers to particular items in hypertext is not intended to reflect their importance, nor is it intended to endorse any views expressed or products or services offered by the author of the reference or the organization operating the site on which the reference is maintained.