



**Office of the  
Chief Medical  
Health Officer**

**March 22, 2018**

**Illness associated with herring eggs – Vancouver Island**

The First Nations Health Authority and Island Health are warning the public following confirmed cases of *Vibrio cholera* associated with the consumption of herring eggs on kelp/seaweed. Herring eggs from kelp/seaweed are a traditional food of several First Nation communities on the island, and are harvested and distributed annually among community members during the time of herring spawning (late February-March). Illness has been reported among people eating herring eggs harvested in communities along the east coast of Vancouver Island from Qualicum Bay to French Creek since the first week of March 2018.

The occurrence of *Vibrio cholera* is very uncommon in BC, and historically has occurred exclusively in travellers returning from endemic areas. This outbreak is not associated with international travel. *Vibrio cholera* can be found in the aquatic environment and can cause acute intestinal illness following consumption of contaminated foods. The disease is characterized by sudden onset vomiting, nausea and profuse painless watery diarrhea. This can lead to rapid severe dehydration and subsequent metabolic, renal and cardiac complications. However, most infections are asymptomatic or mild diarrhea only.

An outbreak investigation is ongoing, and we are aware there may be patients with illness presenting to healthcare providers linked to this outbreak.

**Recommended action for health care providers**

If patients are presenting with diarrheal illness where cholera is suspected or confirmed:

- Treat dehydration and complications supportively. Consider antibiotics for persistent diarrhea only
- Collect stool specimen for culture. Write “query cholera” on lab requisition to ensure that specific testing is also performed for cholera.
- Inquire about recent consumption of herring eggs, and if so, advise patient to stop consumption of any remaining product and to hold on to the product for possible testing by Public Health
- Contact your local medical health officer to report suspected and confirmed cases. Cases should be advised that they may be contacted by Public Health for further follow up.
- Advise ill patients to practice diligent handwashing, and refrain from food preparation while ill. Sanitizing of eating surfaces and cooking equipment in households is also advised.
- Encourage frequent handwashing by people providing care for those ill with diarrheal illness

Note: no specific prophylaxis or vaccination against cholera is recommended at this time for those who may have consumed herring eggs but remain asymptomatic or household contacts of ill people. Emphasize frequent handwashing, and food preparation hygiene for *all* household members (asymptomatic or recovered) as it is possible to transmit the bacteria when asymptomatic if the person is a carrier.

Yours sincerely,

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