

Food Safety Information Notice 01-2024

Guidance on Management of Norovirus for Shellfish Producers



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The Sea-Fisheries Protection Authority (SFPA) has issued a Food Safety Information Notice in relation to implementing effective strategies to manage norovirus risks in oysters, with the aim of reducing the incidence of contaminated oysters entering the market and minimising the occurrence of norovirus-related illnesses.

Legislative Basis/Relevant Documentation

- [EU Regulation 178/2002 Article 14 \(General Food Law\)](#)
- [Opinion by the FSAI Scientific Committee- Risk Management of Norovirus](#)
- [EFSA scientific opinion relating to norovirus detection methods, limits and control measures](#)

Glossary of Terms

Below is a glossary of terms and acronyms used in this document.

Terms / Acronyms	Description
Norovirus (NoV)	A virus causing acute gastroenteritis, often resulting in diarrhoea and vomiting.
FBO	Food Business Operator
HACCP	Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points, a systematic preventive approach to food safety.

Introduction:

Norovirus (NoV), commonly known as the “winter vomiting bug”, is a significant cause of acute gastroenteritis, often causing diarrhoea and vomiting. The virus can be transmitted through the consumption of food or water contaminated with faecal matter, or through contact with infected individuals or contaminated surfaces. Norovirus is prevalent in the community, especially during the winter months and can be present in discharges from wastewater treatment systems, including advanced treatment systems, which may not entirely eliminate NoV.

Bivalve molluscs such as oysters are known to accumulate and concentrate NoV from their surrounding waters. This poses a particular public health risk as oysters are often consumed raw or lightly cooked, meaning that the virus may remain viable at the point of consumption.

Summary:

The consumption of oysters contaminated with NoV presents a significant public health risk. It is vital that Food Business Operators (FBOs) involved in oyster production are cognisant of this risk and implement appropriate management measures, especially during the high-risk winter period.

Food safety responsibilities apply to primary producers (oyster producers or shellfish growers), intermediary operators handling shellfish and approved establishments (purification and dispatch centres).

Under EU and Irish legislation, all FBOs must be registered or approved with the competent authority (SFPA), depending on activities carried out. Primary producers such as shellfish farmers and gatherers of shellfish are obliged to register as a FBO with the SFPA. In addition, land-based establishments handling, purifying and dispatching oysters must be approved.

Further information is available on SFPA website: [Registration-Approval-of-Businesses](#)

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- Primary producers must harvest oysters in accordance with the food hygiene requirements applicable to harvesting shellfish.
- Intermediary operators (those operators other than the first supplier handing shellfish between production areas and any establishments) must meet the requirements set down in the legislation for such operators.
- In establishments which are approved, measures to identify and manage NoV risk should be a part of their food safety management system, adhering to Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points (HACCP) principles.

If a FBO requires testing of product for risk management and quality assurance purposes, the Marine Institute should be contacted to discuss testing requirements.

The SFPA would like to remind the Shellfish Producers of the comprehensive guidance to assist shellfish producers in mitigating the risk of norovirus contamination in oysters, which was developed by SFPA along with the Food Safety Authority of Ireland (FSAI), the Marine Institute (MI) and Bord Iascaigh Mhara (BIM). Currently, there is no regulatory limit for Norovirus in legislation relating to shellfish.

The Guidance outlines a series of recommended risk management options designed to reduce the potential of norovirus contaminated oysters being either harvested or placed on the market. These risk management options include regulatory obligations and recommended best practice and are designed for both primary producers and approved dispatch centres.

The detailed guidance is available on the FSAI website at the following link:

[Interim Guidance on the Management of Norovirus in Oysters by Shellfish Producers](#)

Further Advice/Information:

- Opinion by the Scientific Committee of the Food Safety Authority of Ireland (FSAI) to assist and inform FBOs and risk managers re: risk -based measures to protect consumers from illness. [Risk Management of Norovirus in Oysters - Opinion by the Food Safety Authority of Ireland Scientific Committee](#)
- Further information on selecting an appropriate laboratory for norovirus testing in oysters can be obtained by contacting the Marine Institute,
- Guidance for issues involving the safety and suitability of a food product to clarify and standardise procedures for the identification and removal of unsafe and, where necessary, other non-compliant food from the food chain. [FSAI Guidance Note 10 Product Recall and Traceability](#)

This Food Safety Information Notice was published on the 23rd of February 2024 and updated on 10th March 2026

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