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Disease Investigation Branch

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Ciguatera Fish Poisoning

What is ciguatera fish poisoning?

Ciguatera fish poisoning is an illness caused by eating tropical reef fishes that have accumulated a poison called ciguatoxin. Ciguatoxin is produced by microscopic organisms that grow on the surface of marine algae commonly found in reef areas of the ocean. The poison gets into reef fish when they feed on the algae. The poison can then build up in larger fish when they in turn eat the reef fish.

How do you get it?

You get ciguatera fish poisoning by eating fish contaminated with ciguatoxin.

What are the symptoms of ciguatera fish poisoning?

The symptoms include the following:

- numbness and tingling around the mouth, hands, and feet;
- joint and muscle pains with weakness or cramps;
- vomiting, diarrhea, chills, itching, headache, sweating, and dizziness; and
- reversal of temperature sensation, where cold things feel hot and hot things feel cold.

When do symptoms start?

The symptoms usually begin 2 to 5 hours after eating fish containing ciguatoxin. Individuals can become more sensitive to the effects of ciguatoxin if they are exposed repeatedly. This means the symptoms can appear sooner and be more severe with repeated exposures.

For how long do the symptoms of ciguatera fish poisoning last?

The symptoms may last for a week or so in mild cases, but may continue for several months or longer in some people.

What is the treatment for ciguatera fish poisoning?

The treatment is mainly supportive care. Certain medicines have been reported to be helpful when started early in the illness. It is recommended that a person suffering from ciguatera fish poisoning avoid eating fish, fish sauces, shellfish, alcohol, and nuts for several months after the incident.

How do you keep from getting it?

- Clean fish as soon as possible after they are caught or purchased.
- Do not eat the head, guts, liver or roe (eggs) of any reef fish, especially those of sharks and eels.
- Avoid eating fish caught at sites known to have a ciguatoxic algae problem.
- Remember that the ciguatoxin is not destroyed by cooking, drying, salting, or freezing the fish. Also, ciguatoxin has no smell and will not change the taste or appearance of the fish. So it is impossible to easily identify a fish that may contain the toxin.

For more information, see the CDC's website at <http://www.cdc.gov/ncetd/ciguatera/default.htm>