



Hawaii State Department of Health

Disease Investigation Branch

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Scombroid Fish Poisoning

What is scombroid fish poisoning?

Scombroid fish poisoning is an illness that is caused by eating spoiled fish. It is most commonly reported with ahi, mahimahi, bonito, aku, albacore, sardines, anchovies, and related species of fish that not properly refrigerated or preserved. This improper handling can happen at any stage from the time the fish was caught until it was eaten.

How do you get it?

You get scombroid fish poisoning by eating fish that has been improperly handled. Once the scombroid toxin has formed it can cause illness even if the fish has been later frozen, cooked or eaten raw.

What are the symptoms of scombroid fish poisoning?

A "sharp," "metallic," or "peppery" taste while eating the fish; reddening of the face and sometimes the neck, arms, and upper part of the trunk; severe headache; rapid heartbeat; stomach cramps, nausea, and/or diarrhea; itching on the face or around the mouth, a burning sensation in the throat, or dryness of the mouth; difficulty in swallowing and/or breathing; muscle weakness; a tickling feeling in the hands and feet; and rash.

When do symptoms start?

The symptoms usually appear within one hour after eating decayed fish, but can start within a few minutes to several hours.

For how long do symptoms last?

The symptoms usually last for 8 to 12 hours, after which most persons recover rapidly.

What is the treatment for scombroid fish poisoning?

Antihistamines or epinephrine have been shown to help in many cases.

How can you avoid getting it?

Promptly clean and cook, eat, or refrigerate ahi, mahimahi, bonito, aku, albacore, and other related fishes as soon as possible after capture or purchase.

Be cautious if you detect any unusual "sharp," "metallic," or "peppery" taste when eating fish.

Examine fish for freshness. Be suspicious of any unusual or "off-smells" coming from any fish or fish product. Fish you suspect are spoiled should be discarded.