

# Oysters and Norovirus

Seafood is a good source of protein, and shellfish have been shown to have many [health benefits](#). Farmed UK shellfish are one of the most [sustainable forms of food for us to eat](#), with very low impacts and increasingly recognised benefits to the wider environment. In 2018, approximately 2200 tonnes of oysters were produced in the UK, with an estimated value of £6.9M.

## What is norovirus?

Norovirus is one of the most common causes of gastroenteritis or stomach bugs, and is often referred to as the 'winter vomiting bug'. Norovirus is highly contagious and causes an estimated three million cases per year in the UK. Although the symptoms of norovirus can be unpleasant (diarrhea, nausea and vomiting), they are usually short-lived and most people recover without medical treatment.

The most common cause of transmission is person to person, accounting for 88% of known cases. An estimated 12% of cases occur via the food chain, either through the consumption of food contaminated at source or as a consequence of the foodstuff being contaminated in some way by a food handler during processing or serving.

## Norovirus and Oysters

Bivalve molluscs, which include oysters, mussels, clams, cockles and scallops, are susceptible to picking up and accumulating toxins or microbiological contaminants, including norovirus. If bivalves filter contaminated seawater, they accumulate norovirus particles and retain them in their intestinal tract. When infected bivalves are consumed, without first being cooked, consumers may become ill with norovirus. Because oysters are usually consumed raw, they represent a higher risk than other bivalves.



## Foodborne norovirus risk

[FSA](#) has published an improved understanding of the contribution food makes to the transmission of norovirus in the UK and how that might impact on overall rates of illness related to food. This incorporated a series of retail surveys on oysters, salads and soft fruit, as well as samples from catering and takeaway preparation areas. The main food borne transmission pathways were found to be:

- 63% - poor personal and food hygiene by handlers
- 34% - food borne transmission via salads and soft fruit (raw, ready-to-eat food)
- 3% - food borne transmission via raw oysters.

This clearly highlights the importance of good personal and food hygiene practices in catering and takeaway establishments. The report indicates there is also likely a bias in reporting norovirus incidents associated with oysters because of a long-established association. This is probably exacerbated by the availability of oysters for testing from batches implicated in outbreaks in contrast to salads and soft fruits, which are likely to have perished or been consumed in their entirety before testing is initiated.