This information is to help communities decide whether or not to participate in the new Community-based Fisheries Management Programme of the Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resources for Solomon Islands

INFORMATION SHEET 11

Ciguatera Fish Poisoning

What is Ciguatera Poisoning?
Ciguatera is a form of food poisoning involving fish, which occurs occasionally in most tropical seas. The poison associated with this type of food poisoning is called "ciguatoxin". Ciguatera food poisoning is caused by eating fish containing ciguatoxin.

Ciguatoxin is produced by tiny plants called "dinoflagellates" which are often found attached to other plants growing in coral reef areas. The poison is first taken in by plant-eating fish, and then passed on to larger, predatory fish. As these predatory fish feed, they accumulate the ciguatoxin from their prey in their flesh. The poison does not affect the health of the fish.

What Are the Symptoms of Ciguatera Poisoning?
Symptoms usually commence between 1 to 24 hours after ciguateric fish are eaten, depending on the amount of poison the fish contains and the sensitivity of the consumer.
Symptoms may include
- Tingling and numbness, often in the fingers and toes. But also around the lips, tongue, mouth and throat.
- Burning sensation or skin pain on contact with cold water
- Joint and muscle pains, with weakness and/or cramps
- Muscular weakness, headache, fatigue, fainting
- Extreme itchiness, often worsened by drinking alcohol, and
- In severe cases, difficulty in breathing may occur

In most countries the commonly ciguateric fish is the Red Bohar. Other ciguateric fish include rock cod, emperor, surgeon fish, parrotfish and barracuda.

Some of the species known to be affected by ciguatera poisoning

The presence of the poison, even in high concentrations, does not alter the appearance, smell or taste of the fish. Cooking or freezing does not destroy the poison and there is no simple way to detect or remove it.
- People should not eat large amounts of any one big fish from a coral reef
- If symptoms of poisoning such as tingling and numbness develop, stop eating that fish
- If suspicious about eating a fish, first feed part of it to a cat and wait a few hours, to see if the animal has any bad reaction. Cats are particularly sensitive to ciguatoxin

People who have been poisoned should avoid eating marine fish for 6 to 12 months. Alcohol should be avoided for about 3 months because it can cause symptoms to recur.

Any damage to the coral may cause growth of the poison producing dinoflagellates. The problem may be made worse if nutrient-rich pollution, such as sewage, is involved. Such pollution can not only kill some corals, it may also help marine plants to grow faster.

Poisoning is more likely
- After major natural disturbances, such as cyclones or Crown-of-thorns starfish outbreaks
- After human-induced physical disturbance such as construction work, dynamiting, coral harvesting or dredging; or
- In areas where the levels of pollution have caused a major increase in algal growth on reefs.

For more information contact the Director of Fisheries or the Chief Fisheries Officer for Development and Extension
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