



# NORTON SOUND HEALTH CORPORATION

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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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## **Research Vessel Alerts Communities to Nearby Algal Blooms**

**Nome, Alaska** – A research vessel has contacted several regional entities to issue alerts regarding its findings outside of two communities in the Bering Strait region. The research vessel told Norton Sound Health Corporation, UAF Alaska Sea Grant, and the Alaska Division of Health that blooms of a particular type of algae found near Gambell and Shishmaref have the potential of producing a toxin that can be harmful to consume.

Scientists aboard the research vessel Norseman II have found patches of a phytoplankton called *Alexandrium catenella*, which is a type of algae that can produce saxitoxins – the biotoxins that can cause paralytic shellfish poisoning (PSP). One patch of the highly concentrated algae was found 21 miles to the west offshore of Gambell on July 25. Another patch was found outside the Kotzebue Sound, about 60 miles north of Shishmaref on August 11.

According to Alaska Sea Grant, PSP can occur in people when they eat clams, crabs, and other seafood contaminated with saxitoxin. PSP affects the nervous system and blocks nerve function. If high concentrations of saxitoxin are eaten, breathing difficulties and paralysis occurs in both humans, marine mammals, and seabirds.

Alaska Sea Grant reports that consuming walrus intestine, stomach, and/or their contents in areas with known biotoxins likely has the same risk as consuming shellfish from those areas. People cannot see, smell, or taste algae toxins. Cooking or freezing these foods will not lessen the toxin's effect.

The research vessel's team has not yet tested its samples for the presence of saxitoxin. It will continue to collect seawater samples for analysis and other measurements from around the Bering Strait. The scientists aboard the vessel will notify NSHC, Alaska Sea Grant, and the Division of Public Health when the concentration of the algae species reaches a level that is considered dangerous and high enough to trigger an advisory for nearby coastal communities to be cautious when consuming marine wildlife resources.

Meanwhile, regional organizations including NSHC and Alaska Sea Grant are collecting local samples in Nome, Gambell, Savoonga, and Shishmaref of sea water and marine wildlife to test for saxitoxin presence. Samples will be sent out for laboratory testing, and NSHC will notify the region of the results. Up-to-date information will be accessible at NSHC Office of Environmental Health's webpage at [www.nortonsoundhealth.org/oeh](http://www.nortonsoundhealth.org/oeh).

If you feel sick from eating clams or other shellfish, contact your health care provider immediately.

If you see any marine wildlife, including walruses, acting in an unusual manner or dead in the Bering Strait region, please contact the following:

- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) Marine Mammals Management: 1-800-362-5148
- Alaska Marine Mammal Stranding Network: (877) 925-7773
- UAF Alaska Sea Grant, Gay Sheffield: (907) 434-1149
- Kawerak, Subsistence, Brandon Ahmasuk: (907) 443-4265