



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 bacterially spoiled fish. It is most commonly reported with ahi, mahimahi, bonito, aku, albacore, mackerel, sardines, anchovies, and related species of fish that were 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 not been properly handled. Refrigeration stops bacteria from breaking down fish proteins to form histamine and other substances that block histamine breakdown. Eating spoiled fish with high levels of histamines can cause this illness.

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, abdominal pain, 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 begin within 2 minutes to 2 hours after eating spoiled fish containing high levels of histamines.

For how long do symptoms last?

Symptoms usually last for 8 to 12 hours, after which most persons recover rapidly. Symptoms may be more severe in patients taking medications that slow the breakdown of histamines by the liver, such as isoniazid and doxycycline.

What is the treatment for scombroid fish poisoning?

Treatment is often unnecessary, but antihistamines or epinephrine can 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 fish 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 that are suspected to be spoiled should be discarded.

For more information, please see the CDC's website at <https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/page/fish-poisoning-ciguatera-scombroid>

or <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scombroid>