

RED TIDE

Frequently Asked Questions



What is Florida red tide?

A red tide is a higher-than-normal concentration of a microscopic alga (plant-like organisms). In Florida, the species that causes most red tides is *Karenia brevis* (K. brevis). This organism produces a toxin that can affect the central nervous system of fish. At high concentrations (called a bloom), the organisms may discolor the water. However, red tides are not always red. They can appear greenish, brownish and even purple in color. Or, the water can remain its normal color.

Do red tides occur anywhere else?

Yes. Although the organism that causes Florida's red tide is found almost exclusively in the Gulf of Mexico, blooms have been found off the east coast of Florida, and a bloom was detected off the coast of North Carolina in 1987. Scientists believe the Florida Current and Gulf Stream Current carried K. brevis out of the Gulf of Mexico, around south Florida, and up to the Carolina coast. Other types of microorganisms cause different kinds of red tides (now called harmful algal blooms or HABs) in other parts of the world as well. HABs occur in both saltwater and freshwater.

How long does red tide typically last?

It can last days, weeks, months and it can change daily due to wind conditions. Thus, contact your local area for accurate and current conditions.

Is red tide a new phenomenon?

No. The first official reporting of red tide in Florida was in 1844. Government officials documented discolored water and massive fish kills.

For red tide health information or questions call:

Marine and Freshwater Hotline 1-888-232-8635

To report red tide or fish kills, contact:

FMRI at 800-636-0511 or aquatichealth@fwc.state.fl.us

For red tide updates, visit: www.floridamarine.org

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RED TIDE

PUBLIC HEALTH

Is it safe to swim during a red tide?

Yes, for most people. However, for some people, red tide can cause skin irritation and burning eyes. Use common sense. If you are particularly susceptible to irritation from plant products, avoid red tide water. If you experience irritation, get out and thoroughly wash off. Do not swim among dead fish because they can be associated with harmful bacteria.

How is red tide related to respiratory irritation?

People experience respiratory irritation (coughing, sneezing, and tearing) when the red tide organism (K. brevis) is present along the coast and winds blow its toxic aerosol onshore.

CAUTION: People with severe or chronic respiratory conditions (such as bronchitis, emphysema or asthma) are cautioned to avoid red tide areas. Generally, symptoms are temporary and disappear within hours (once exposure is discontinued). Most people find air-conditioned facilities decrease symptoms quickly. Since the red tide toxin is particulate matter when airborne, wearing a particle filter mask may lessen effects while on the beach.

SEAFOOD SAFETY

Is it safe to eat seafood in restaurants during a red tide?

Yes. Commercial seafood from local restaurants and grocery stores and seafood stores must be harvested from red tide free waters. This includes shellfish.

Can I fish for seafood during a red tide?

Yes and No! Shellfish must be avoided. There have been no reports of human illness from eating filleted fish caught during a red tide.

Is it okay to eat shellfish during a red tide?

No. If a shellfish-harvesting ban is in effect, it is not safe to eat mollusks (e.g., clams and oysters) and gastropods that feed on bivalves (e.g., whelks). However, edible parts of other animals, commonly called shellfish (e.g., crabs, shrimp and lobsters), are not affected by the red tide organisms and can be eaten.

What shellfish are included in a shellfish-harvesting ban?

Harvesting of bivalve mollusks such as clams, oysters, and coquinas is banned during red tides.

Is it okay to eat fish, crabs or shrimp during a red tide?

Yes, because the toxin is not absorbed in the edible tissues of these animals. However, use common sense! Harvesting distressed or dead animals is not advised regardless of the cause of death or distress.

Does cooking destroy the red tide toxin?

No

