

WHAT IS CIQUATERA ?

Ciguatera is a particular type of food poisoning caused by eating tropical reef fish. Ciguatera fish poisoning has been known for centuries; it is widespread in all intertropical regions where there are coral reefs, and it has a major impact on the economies of islands.

4 - Symptoms

Signs of ciguatera poisoning usually start anywhere from 2 to 12 hours after eating ciguatoxic fish.

The most common signs are:

- Nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea, stomach pains;
- A numb or "prickly" feeling around your lips, nose, hands, feet and skin;
- A burning sensation when you touch cold water;
- Pain in your muscles and joints;
- Headaches, tiredness, sweating, shivering;
- Itchiness;
- Slow pulse with normal temperature.

5 - Treatment

There is still no treatment for ciguatera. Your doctor can prescribe remedies to relieve discomfort or pain.

Many traditional remedies are also used and some have been proven to work.

Several cases, which are infrequent, can cause paralysis, coma and death.

You can get ciguatera more than once. The poisoning gets worse and you have a greater chance of showing the symptoms each time.

A poisonous fish eaten by two or more people may therefore make only one person sick.

3 - Toxic fish

Toxic fish do not look, smell or taste different from safe fish. The bigger they are, the more toxin they contain and the greater the risk of poisoning. The liver and head contain much more toxin than the flesh. Cooking, freezing, smoking or salting does not make fish safe to eat. The species that can give you ciguatera vary from place to place.

2 - Food chain

Herbivorous fish "graze" on these algae and are eaten by carnivorous fish. The toxin is passed on in this way and builds up through the food chain. Eating toxic fish from any part of the food chain can poison humans but poisoning is often more severe higher up the food chain.

1 - Where does ciguatera come from ?

Ciguatera comes from naturally occurring microscopic algae that often bloom on reefs damaged by natural events such as cyclones or by human activity.

To minimise the risk, the following precautions can be taken

- Avoid eating species of fish locally blamed for fish poisoning (do not hesitate to ask local fishers);
- Only eat small specimens of each species;
- Clean the fish thoroughly; do not eat the viscera, liver, head or eggs;
- Do not rely on popular detection methods;
- After suffering from ciguatera fish poisoning, avoid fish, other kinds of seafood and meat for at least a month; alcohol and hazelnuts should also be avoided.