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How to Spot a Safe Seafood Seller

Anyone who's ever smelled rotting seafood at the fish counter has a pretty good idea of what a poorly run seafood market smells like. But the absence of any strong odor doesn't necessarily mean that the seller is practicing safe food handling techniques.

Based on FDA's Food Code, here are some other points to consider:

Employees should be in clean clothing but no outerwear and wearing hair coverings.

They shouldn't be smoking, eating, or playing with their hair. They shouldn't be sick or have any open wounds.

Employees should be wearing disposable gloves when handling food and change gloves after doing nonfood tasks and after handling any raw seafood.

Fish should be displayed on a thick bed of fresh, not melting ice, preferably in a case or under some type of cover. Fish should be arranged with the bellies down so that the melting ice drains away from the fish, thus reducing the chances of spoilage.

What's your general impression of the facility? Does it look clean? Smell clean? Is it free of flies and bugs? A well-maintained facility can indicate that the vendor is following good sanitation practices.

Is the seafood employee knowledgeable about different types of seafood? Can he or she tell you how old the products are and explain why their seafood is fresh? If they can't, you should take your business elsewhere.

Figuring Out What's Fresh

The fish's eyes should be clear and bulge a little. Only a few fish, such as walleye, have naturally cloudy eyes.

Whole fish and fillets should have firm and shiny flesh. Dull flesh may mean the fish is old. Fresh whole fish also should have bright red gills free from slime.

If the flesh doesn't spring back when pressed, the fish isn't fresh.

There should be no darkening around the edges of the fish or brown or yellowish discoloration.

The fish should smell fresh and mild, not fishy or ammonia-like.

Consumer Steps to Safer Seafood

Here's what you can do when it's your turn to take charge of food safety:

When Choosing Seafood:

- Buy only from reputable sources. Be wary, for example, of vendors selling fish out of the back of their pick-up trucks.
- Buy only fresh seafood that is refrigerated or properly iced.
- Don't buy cooked seafood, such as shrimp, crabs or smoked fish if displayed in the same case as raw fish. Cross-contamination can occur.
- Don't buy frozen seafood if the packages are open, torn or crushed on the edges. Avoid packages that are above the frost line in the store's freezer. If the package cover is transparent, look for signs of frost or ice crystals. This could mean that the fish has either been stored for a long time or thawed and refrozen.
- Put seafood on ice, in the refrigerator or in the freezer, immediately after buying it.
- Recreational fishers who plan to eat their catch should follow state and local government advisories about fishing areas and eating fish from certain areas.

Storing:

- If seafood will be used within two days after purchase, store it in the coldest part of the refrigerator, usually under the freezer compartment or in a special "meat keeper." Avoid packing it in tightly with other items; allow air to circulate freely around the package. Otherwise, wrap the food tightly in moisture-proof freezer paper or foil to protect it from air leaks and store in the freezer.
- Discard shellfish, such as lobsters, crabs, oysters, clams, and mussels, if they die during storage or if their shells crack or break. Live shellfish close up when the shell is tapped.

Preparing:

- Wash hands thoroughly with hot soapy water before and after handling any raw food.
- Thaw frozen seafood in the refrigerator. Gradual defrosting overnight is best because it helps maintain quality. If you must thaw seafood quickly, seal it in a plastic bag and immerse in cold water for about an hour, or microwave on the "defrost" setting if the food is to be cooked immediately. Stop the defrost cycle while the fish is still icy but pliable.
- Marinate seafood in the refrigerator, not on the counter. Discard the marinade after use because it contains raw juices, which may harbor bacteria. If you want to use the marinade as a dip or sauce, reserve a portion before adding raw food.
- Do not allow cooked seafood to come in contact with raw products. Use separate cutting boards and utensils or wash items completely between use.

Cooking:

- It's always best to cook seafood. It's a must for at-risk people. (See ["Who's at Risk?"](#)) The Food and Drug Administration's 1997 Food Code recommends cooking most seafood to an internal temperature of 145 F (63 C) for 15 seconds.
- If you don't have a thermometer, there are other ways to determine whether seafood is done:
 - For fish, slip the point of a sharp knife into the flesh and pull aside. The edges should be opaque and the center slightly translucent with flakes beginning to separate. Let the fish stand three to four minutes to finish cooking.
 - For shrimp, lobster and scallops, check color. Shrimp and lobster turn red and the flesh becomes pearly opaque. Scallops turn milky white or opaque and firm.
 - For clams, mussels and oysters, watch for the point at which their shells open. That means they're done. Throw out those that stay closed.
- When using the microwave, rotate the dish several times to ensure even cooking. Follow recommended standing times. After the standing time is completed, check the seafood in several spots with a meat thermometer to be sure the product has reached the proper temperature.

Serving:

- Keep hot foods hot (140 F [60 C]) or higher and cold foods cold (41 F [5 C]) or lower.

- Do not keep cooked seafood unrefrigerated or unfrozen for more than two hours.

Who's at Risk?

People with certain diseases and conditions need to be especially careful to follow safe seafood practices. Their diseases or the medicines they take may put them at risk for serious illness or death from contaminated seafood.

These conditions include:

- liver disease, either from excessive alcohol use, viral hepatitis, or other causes
- hemochromatosis, an iron disorder
- diabetes
- stomach problems, including previous stomach surgery and low stomach acid (for example, from antacid use)
- cancer
- immune disorders, including HIV infection
- long-term steroid use, as for asthma and arthritis.

Older adults also may be at increased risk because they more often have these conditions. People with these diseases or conditions should never eat raw seafood--only seafood that has been thoroughly cooked.

--P.K.