YES! The U.S. Food and Drug Administration’s Office of Seafood is on record as saying, On a pound-for-pound basis, seafood is as safe as, if not more safe than, other meat sources. Unfortunately, seafood has suffered some bad press in recent years. Concerns about water quality and environmental issues have led some to speculate and overdramatize reports regarding the safety of seafood. In reality, illnesses can result from the cross-contamination of cooked and raw foods, from contamination which occurs during preparation or from eating seafood harvested from closed waters, but more often seafood-related illnesses occur from eating raw or undercooked shellfish.

The National Academy of Science spent two years in the early 1990s studying the health risks associated with eating seafood. Their report concludes: Fish and shellfish are nutritious foods that constitute desirable components of a healthy diet. Most seafoods available to the public are wholesome and unlikely to cause illness.

To gather some factual statistics on seafood safety, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the federal agency charged with ensuring the safety of our nation’s food supply, studied reports of seafood-related illnesses filed with the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) along with other available epidemiological studies. They found the risk of becoming sick from eating seafood to be one in 250,000, compared to one in 25,000 risk from eating poultry. If raw molluscan shellfish (clams, oysters and mussels) are excluded from these numbers, the risk of eating seafood drops to one in a million - much less than either beef or poultry. CDC statistics clearly show that the most serious culprits of foodborne illness are raw shellfish.

There is much average consumers can do personally to eliminate the risks of illness and assure the wholesomeness and safety of their seafood.

Make careful selections when purchasing seafood: Buy only from reputable dealers who are knowledgeable about their sources and products. Use your senses to determine the quality of your product. Start by looking at the cleanliness of the store, the display cases and the employees. Look to see that fresh seafoods are refrigerated or properly iced and that cooked foods are not in contact with raw foods. A fish’s eyes should be clear and bulge slightly. Only a few fish, such as walleye, have naturally cloudy eyes. The flesh of whole fish and fillets should be firm and shiny. Fresh whole fish should have bright red gills. The odors, if any, in your seafood store should be clean and natural, but not strong or fishy. Likewise, seafood should have a slight but fresh odor.

Avoid cross-contamination. Raw seafood, whether fresh or frozen, will normally carry some microorganisms on their outside surfaces. This is particularly true of live shellfish. Cross-contamination occurs when one product form contacts another form of the same or a different food.
Thawing. Thaw frozen seafood in the refrigerator (about 18 hours per pound), under cold running water (about 1 hour per pound) or in the 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. Under no circumstances should you thaw frozen seafood at room temperature or under warm running water.

Preparing seafood. Food preparers should wash their hands thoroughly with hot soapy water before and after handling any raw food. 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 the raw seafood.

Cooking seafood. The FDA Food Code recommends cooking most seafood to an internal temperature of 145° F for 15 seconds. If you don’t have a thermometer, determine doneness in fish by gently flaking the thicker part with a sharp knife. The flesh should be slightly translucent with flakes beginning to separate. Let the fish stand three to four more minutes to finish cooking. Shrimp turn pink and lobster red when they are fully cooked. The flesh is pearly opaque. Scallops turn milky white or opaque and firm. Clams, mussels and oysters will open when they are done. Throw away any that stay closed.

Seafood is a versatile and tasty food choice. Fish and shellfish can be baked, broiled, steamed, fried, poached, grilled, microwaved and smoked. Seafood is easily substituted in popular recipes calling for other meat products. Fish and shellfish are fine main ingredients in soups, salads, sandwiches and casseroles, and are excellent in stir-fry dishes with vegetables and in pasta offerings.

Safety First. People with certain illnesses and conditions need to be especially careful to handle seafood safely. Certain diseases or medications put some people at greater risk for 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; cancer; immune disorders, including HIV infection; and long-term steroid use, as for asthma and arthritis. Raw consumption poses the greatest threat for illness for any consumer so if you or someone you know falls into the above at-risk groups, put safety first and thoroughly cook all seafood.

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