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For Immediate Release
November 16, 2004

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DOH REMINDS HIGH RISK INDIVIDUALS ABOUT POTENTIAL RISKS OF EATING RAW OYSTERS

Tallahassee – Today, officials with the Department of Health urged high risk Floridians to avoid consuming raw oysters, which often harbor the naturally occurring bacteria *Vibrio vulnificus*.

“Even as water temperatures cool across our state, we continue to see cases of *Vibrio vulnificus* infections,” DOH Secretary John O. Agwunobi, M.D., M.B.A., M.P.H., said. “The old wives’ tale that raw oysters are safe in months that have a R simply isn’t true. For those who are in high risk groups, there is no safe time to consume raw oysters.”

Those most at-risk for developing serious illness from *Vibrio vulnificus* include heavy drinkers with liver damage and people with certain health conditions such as liver disease, diabetes, cancer, stomach disorders or any illness or treatment that weakens the immune system. While otherwise healthy persons eating raw oysters with this bacterium are less susceptible to becoming ill, at-risk individuals are more likely to become extremely ill or die. People in these high-risk groups are also at risk of illness if they have wounds or cuts and wade in estuarine areas or seawater where the bacteria might be present.

Thoroughly cooking oysters, either by frying, stewing or roasting, eliminates harmful bacteria and viruses in the meat. Consuming raw oysters that have undergone a post-harvest treatment process to eliminate the bacteria can also reduce the risk of illness. Initial symptoms of *Vibrio vulnificus* infection can include mild nausea, vomiting or diarrhea, followed by distinctive swollen skin lesions, and septicemia (blood poisoning). If someone experiences these symptoms after consuming raw oysters, they should contact their personal physician immediately for diagnosis and to receive antibiotic treatment.

So far this year, the Florida Department of Health (DOH) has investigated 6 cases of *Vibrio vulnificus* from oyster consumption, 2 of which resulted in death. 28 additional cases are attributed to wound or unknown exposures with 6 deaths. For more information, please visit DOH’s website at www.doh.state.fl.us and choose “Food and Waterborne Disease” from the subject list.

Information can also be obtained by visiting the Interstate Shellfish Sanitation Conference website at www.issc.org/, choose “Consumer Education” from the Subject List, then choose, “Risks of Eating Raw Oysters” or from the CDC website at: <http://www.cdc.gov/health/diseases.htm>. Click on Health Topics A-Z and choose *Vibrio vulnificus*.

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