

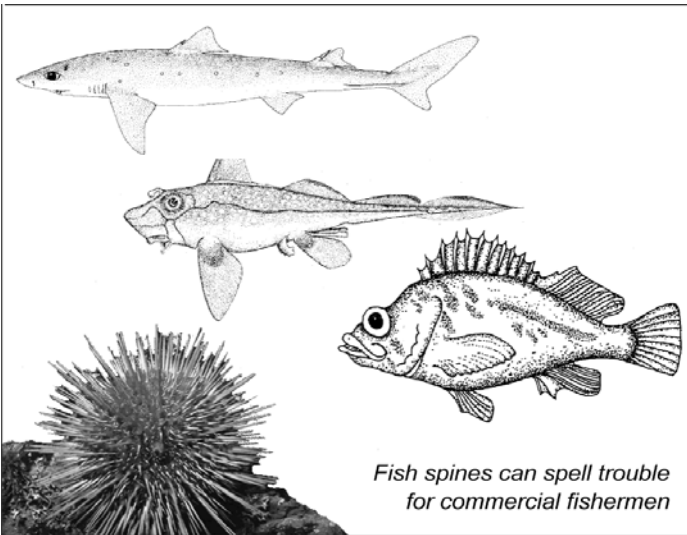
# The Great Barrier Reef is Closer to Us Than it Seems



BY  
**HARVEY  
LINTON**  
WorkSafeBC Industry and  
Labour Services Manager,  
General Industries

Last fall's death of "Crocodile Hunter" Steve Irwin — stabbed by a toxic sting ray barb — made me think of BC's commercial fishermen: though you're nowhere near the Great Barrier Reef, you do risk similar fish poisoning.

In our waters, the sharp spines of dogfish, rattfish, rockfish, sea urchins and others have varying degrees of toxicity. Bacteria in spines and fish slime pose serious infection hazards.



Like me, you probably remember being exposed to fish poisoning. Once when hauling halibut gear, I was shaking off a rattfish when it dropped on my boot; and the spine went through to my big toenail. The toe wasn't pierced, but it was sore as heck for days. Another time, we made a set after a night pit lamping for herring (legal at that time). We hauled back our seine and saw numerous green eyes where the herring were rushing in the net. Then it rained dogfish from the power block. Wearing heavy oilskins and hardhats, we were lucky that their spines didn't hurt anyone.

Fishermen are prone to hand injuries, a bad combination with fish toxin. One scenario is pulp space infection, which happens because tissue at the tip of each finger is completely closed off. Infection and pus can be trapped there, causing painful swelling. Another scenario happens back from the fingertip, as tendons carry infection to the communal tendon sheath in the palm and cause severe pain and swelling of the hand.

Signs of fish poisoning include red, itchy, swollen or pus-filled wounds, and sometimes fever. Where possible, see a doctor right away if a red streak appears from the wound. Otherwise, basic wound care principles apply to treating fish poisoning injuries. It's important to relieve pain and clean the wound of all foreign material as soon as possible. Irrigating the wound may be necessary to remove toxins from spines or fish slime whose bacteria can lead to easy infection of cuts and broken skin. Missed foreign material will delay or prevent healing.

If a wound gets red or swollen, soak it at least three times a day for a half hour or more in hot, soapy water (115°F/45°C). Keep the wound dry and bandaged.

Never ignore infection; the potential health threat is more serious than a pair of hands out of commission for a short time. Left untreated, fish poisoning can be dangerous. The best thing, of course, is to avoid contact with fish toxins and slime.

Fish spines can penetrate rubber boots, causing painful foot injuries, so be careful on deck wading through fish with spines. Also, be cautious shaking or rolling dogfish, other spiny fish or jellyfish (especially red ones) out of the net.

Wear clean, dry gloves, and change them often to keep your hands dry; discard torn gloves. Use soap or antiseptic to wash wet, slimy, bloody gloves — or risk infection the next time you wear them. After handling fish, wash your hands thoroughly in hot soapy water, particularly if they contacted fish or fish slime. Treat even the slightest cuts with an antiseptic.

These preventive measures are a lot less trouble than losing precious fishing time because a shipmate with fish poisoning needs medical attention.

You can e-mail comments to [Ellen.Hanson@worksafebc.com](mailto:Ellen.Hanson@worksafebc.com), or phone her directly at **604-233-4008** in the Lower Mainland and toll-free elsewhere in BC at **1-888-621-7233**.



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