

VHS in Lake Michigan: Questions and Answers

What is VHS?

Viral hemorrhagic septicemia (VHS) is a fish disease that was first found in the Great Lakes in 2005. The VHS virus can cause bleeding of fish tissue, including internal organs, and can cause the death of infected fish. On a larger scale, the virus can cause sizeable fish die-offs with multiple species. It was recently detected in Illinois waters of Lake Michigan.

Is it harmful to humans?

VHS does not pose any threat to human health. It will not harm people who handle or eat infected fish or swim in infected waters. Likewise, dogs that play in or drink from infected waters will not be harmed.

How does it spread?

VHS can be spread when people move infected fish (both game fish and bait fish) or water containing the virus from one water body to another. IL DNR has enacted new regulations to minimize the spread of VHS (see * below). Other mammals and birds are not primary transporters of VHS.

What can I do to prevent the spread?

- Do not move live fish from one water body to another.*
- Dispose of leftover bait in the trash, not in the water* or on land.
- Use wild-caught bait (including cut-bait) only in the waters from where you captured it.*
- Inspect your boat, trailer and equipment and remove visible aquatic plants, animals and mud before leaving a water body.
- Drain water from your boat, motor, bilge, live wells and bait containers before transporting.*
- Wash your boat and equipment with high pressure or hot water, or let it dry for five days.

*Required of all boaters/anglers under IL DNR regulations.

What does this mean for Lake Michigan?

Because VHS is new to the Great Lakes, it is unclear what the long-term effect will be on Lake Michigan. Nearly 30 common species of fish are susceptible to this virus and it could impact sport fish in Lake Michigan. There might be die-offs every year, primarily in the spring since the virus is most active in water temperatures between 32-53°F. On the other hand, the disease may fade away as remaining fish develop immunity to VHS.

How did it get here?

It's unclear how VHS was introduced into Great Lakes. It may have been introduced via fish migrating from the Atlantic coast, frozen Pacific herring imported for use as bait, or ballast water in ships coming from the Atlantic Coast.

How do fish become infected?

Fish become infected when a VHS virus in the water enters their gills or when they consume an infected fish (including cut-bait). Infected fish shed the virus into the water via their urine and reproductive fluids; these viruses can then infect other fish.

What fish species are affected?

In the Great Lake region, VHS has affected nearly 30 species of fish including bluegill, Chinook salmon, emerald shiner, gizzard shad, lake whitefish, round goby, spottail shiner, walleye and yellow perch. For a complete list of species affected, visit www.iisgcp.org/vhs.

What are the symptoms in fish?

Fish infected with the VHS virus may or may not show symptoms. The typical symptoms (bleeding, bulging eyes, unusual behavior, bloated abdomen, rapid death) may apply to many different fish diseases. Therefore, VHS must be confirmed by lab tests.

What should I do if I think I found it?

If you see a large number (e.g., more than 50) of dead, stressed or sick fish, note the location and contact IL-IN Sea Grant at **847-872-0141**.

For more information on VHS visit our website at www.iisgcp.org/VHS.

