

REVIEW

Hidden risk in the summer; gastroenteritis caused by marine bacteria in tourists

Riesgo oculto en el verano; gastroenteritis por bacterias marinas en turistas

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ABSTRACT

Every summer, thousands of Paraguayans travel to Brazilian beaches, where recreational contact with seawater and the consumption of fish and shellfish—often raw or undercooked—increases the risk of acquiring gastrointestinal illnesses. Marine bacteria such as *Vibrio parahaemolyticus*, *Aeromonas* spp., and *Plesiomonas shigelloides*, as well as enterobacteria associated with fecal contamination such as *E. coli* and *Salmonella* spp., have been documented in Brazilian coastal areas. High surface water temperatures during the summer favor the proliferation of *Vibrio*, increasing the environmental microbial load. Other fecal-oral pathogens, such as *Cryptosporidium* spp., are also present. *Vibrio* bacteria persist in drinking or recreational water and can cause acute diarrhea, especially in children and immunocompromised individuals. Thus, contaminated seafood, inadequate sanitation, and informal beach food consumption are factors that facilitate infection. Evidence shows that the Brazilian coast acts as a natural reservoir of enteric pathogens relevant to tourists. Therefore, health education, prioritizing the consumption of well-cooked seafood, choosing reputable restaurants, and seeking early medical attention are key measures to reduce the incidence of acute diarrhea among Paraguayan vacationers.

Keywords: *Vibrio*; Gastroenteritis; Tourists; Summer.

RESUMEN

Cada verano, miles de paraguayos viajan a playas de Brasil, donde el contacto recreacional con agua de mar y el consumo de pescados y mariscos —con frecuencia crudos o poco cocidos— incrementa el riesgo de adquirir enfermedades gastrointestinales. En las zonas costeras brasileñas se han documentado bacterias marinas como *Vibrio parahaemolyticus*, *Aeromonas* spp. y *Plesiomonas shigelloides*, además de enterobacterias asociadas a contaminación fecal como *E. coli* y *Salmonella* spp.. Las altas temperaturas superficiales del agua durante el verano favorecen la proliferación de *Vibrio*, aumentando la carga microbiana ambiental. Asimismo, otros patógenos de transmisión fecal-oral, como *Cryptosporidium* spp., persisten en agua potable o recreacional y pueden generar diarrea aguda, especialmente en niños e inmunocomprometidos. De este modo, los alimentos marinos contaminados, el saneamiento insuficiente y el consumo informal de comidas en playa son factores que facilitan la infección. La evidencia demuestra que la costa brasileña actúa como reservorio natural de patógenos entéricos relevantes para turistas. Por ello, la educación sanitaria, el consumo preferente de mariscos bien cocidos, la selección de locales formales y la consulta médica temprana son medidas clave para disminuir la incidencia de diarreas agudas en vacacionistas paraguayos.

Palabras clave: *Vibrio*; Gastroenteritis; Turistas; Verano.

INTRODUCTION

During the summer months, from December to March, thousands of Paraguayan tourists travel to coastal destinations in Brazil because of the ease of language, distance, and affordable hotels.⁽¹⁾ This tourist flow is concentrated in high-density recreational resorts, where direct contact with seawater and the consumption of fish and shellfish are standard practices.⁽²⁾ However, in these coastal areas, the presence of pathogenic marine bacteria such as *Vibrio parahaemolyticus*, *Aeromonas* spp. and *Plesiomonas shigelloides*,⁽³⁾ as well as enterobacteria associated with fecal contamination in urban waters (*E. coli*, *Salmonella* spp.),⁽⁴⁾ pose a risk for gastroenteritis, especially when raw or undercooked bivalve mollusks (oysters, mussels) are consumed, or when tourists eat food prepared under poor hygiene conditions, which is very common at beach kiosks and street vendors.⁽⁵⁾

In addition, the seasonal increase in surface water temperatures during summer favors the proliferation of *Vibrio* spp., thereby increasing the bacterial load and raising the risk of gastrointestinal infections even in previously healthy individuals. Therefore, acute diarrhea among Paraguayan tourists during or after their stay in Brazil may be directly related to recreational exposure to seawater or to the consumption of seafood contaminated with *Salmonella*.⁽⁶⁾ Given this scenario, pre-travel health education,⁽⁷⁾ the preferential consumption of cooked seafood, the choice of establishments with visible food safety controls, and early medical attention for diarrheal symptoms are straightforward but essential measures to reduce the incidence of gastrointestinal diseases in the Paraguayan vacationing population.⁽⁸⁾

In this epidemiological context, it is essential to remember that during the summer period, the risk of other fecal-oral microorganisms that cause gastrointestinal diseases—or “diarrheal diseases”—should also be considered. These diseases constitute a significant public health problem in children in underdeveloped regions of the world,⁽⁸⁾ due to high costs, high demand for consultations and hospitalizations, and being a significant cause of infant mortality.⁽⁹⁾ Thus, both bacterial infections acquired at Brazilian beaches and resorts and other enteric etiologies associated with poor sanitation share the same route of transmission and have a significant clinical and epidemiological impact on tourists and vulnerable populations.

Objective: to describe the gastrointestinal bacteria present in contaminated seawater as an agent of gastroenteritis.

METHOD

A bibliographic search was conducted to collect information on marine bacteria that cause gastrointestinal diseases, recent publications, and the search period covered bacteria as causal agents, signs, symptoms, and treatment. Scielo, Google Scholar, and PubMed were consulted, and the search period covered September and October 2018-2025.

RESULTS

Among the most relevant bacterial diseases in marine environments, vibriosis stands out, as species of the genus *Vibrio*—both pathogenic and nonpathogenic—are among the microorganisms commonly found in coastal, marine, and estuarine waters.⁽¹⁰⁾

In this regard, considering the intense movement of Paraguayan tourists who travel to Brazilian beaches every summer, it is essential to remember that natural aquatic ecosystems function as environmental reservoirs for multiple causative agents of waterborne infectious diseases, including *Vibrio cholerae*, *Salmonella typhi*, and *Escherichia coli*, all of which are involved in cases of acute gastroenteritis transmitted by the fecal-oral route.⁽¹¹⁾

Similarly, because various species of *Vibrio* can infect aquatic organisms such as fish, shrimp, and oysters—which are subsequently marketed and consumed as food—it is necessary to strengthen health surveillance strategies and recommend the purchase of products from hygienic and certified establishments, especially during the high tourist season, when demand and informal consumption of seafood and fish increases in coastal areas.⁽¹²⁾

Also noteworthy is the presence of *Vibrio cholerae*, which causes watery diarrhea and is a gram-negative bacterium that produces a toxin.⁽¹³⁾

In addition, other species can cause serious infections. The most frequent clinical presentations are primary sepsis after consumption of contaminated raw oysters, especially in patients with liver disease,⁽¹⁴⁾ hematopoietic disease, or chronic renal failure, or immunocompromised patients, and skin and soft tissue infections after exposure to contaminated brackish water. The fatality rates are over 50 % for primary septicemia and 15 % for wound infections.⁽¹⁵⁾

Vibriosis can range from simple gastroenteritis to cases of septicemia. Such infectious conditions may be associated with the consumption of contaminated water or food, especially raw seafood.⁽¹⁶⁾

Several species of *Vibrio* are pathogenic to humans and may be present in raw or partially cooked seafood.⁽¹⁷⁾ This is particularly relevant in Brazil, where coastal regions are frequently exposed to the consumption of raw or partially cooked seafood on beaches and at informal stalls, which can act as a common source of explosive

outbreaks, as can the foods and beverages mentioned above.⁽¹⁸⁾

Consequently, the consumption of contaminated food—especially raw seafood—promotes direct exposure to *Vibrio cholerae*, increasing the risk of transmission in contexts of poor sanitation. Under these conditions, vibrios can behave as opportunistic pathogens, capable of causing high mortality in populations exposed to physiological or environmental stress.⁽¹⁹⁾

Another causative pathogen is *Cryptosporidium* spp. It is an intestinal protozoan that is a significant cause of infectious diarrhea in both rural and urban communities.⁽²⁰⁾ This parasitic disease represents a significant public health challenge because the oocysts shed by infected individuals are highly resistant in the environment and remain viable in drinking and recreational water for prolonged periods, even after conventional disinfection processes.⁽²¹⁾ In this sense, cryptosporidiosis is clinically characterized by episodes of watery diarrhea, abdominal pain, nausea, vomiting, and, in some cases, significant dehydration, which particularly affects young children, older adults, and immunocompromised individuals.⁽²²⁾

Likewise, multiple studies have documented that transmission occurs predominantly via the fecal-oral route, through the consumption of contaminated water or food handled without adequate sanitary hygiene. This phenomenon is intensified in settings where water treatment systems are insufficient or intermittent.⁽²³⁾

Added to this are environmental factors such as surface water contamination, poor sanitation infrastructure, inadequate excreta management, and increased recreational exposure to contaminated water bodies.⁽²⁴⁾

In immunocompromised patients—such as those with chronic diseases, malnutrition, or immunosuppressive treatments—the infection can take a more persistent and severe course, with a risk of severe dehydration, electrolyte imbalances, and systemic complications that require ongoing medical care.⁽²⁵⁾ Therefore, *Cryptosporidium* spp. continues to be a pathogen of priority epidemiological surveillance, especially in Latin American countries, where social inequalities, consumption of untreated water, and structural deficiencies in basic sanitation continue to allow its active circulation.⁽²⁶⁾ The disease known as cryptosporidiosis has a moderate to severe impact in developing countries and is responsible for clinical (enteritis and severe diarrhea) and subclinical (respiratory system) infections.⁽²⁷⁾

Its main clinical presentation is acute gastroenteritis: diarrhea (lasting less than two weeks) accompanied by symptoms such as vomiting, abdominal pain, or fever.⁽²⁸⁾

Other vital bacteria are enterobacteria such as *E. coli*. *Escherichia coli* is a Gram-negative bacillus belonging to the Enterobacteriaceae family, considered part of the human intestinal microbiota,⁽²⁹⁾ but with various pathotypes capable of causing gastrointestinal disease, especially enterotoxigenic and enterohemorrhagic strains.⁽³⁰⁾ Transmission occurs mainly via the fecal-oral route, through the consumption of contaminated water or food, cross-contamination during food preparation, and poor food handling, particularly in regions with limited sanitation.⁽³¹⁾ Clinically, the infection usually manifests as watery or bloody diarrhea, colicky abdominal pain, nausea, and vomiting, and in some cases can progress to complications such as hemolytic uremic syndrome when enterohemorrhagic strains are involved.⁽³²⁾ Treatment is based on oral or intravenous hydration, electrolyte replacement, and monitoring for warning signs; the use of antibiotics should be individualized and, in the case of infections caused by pathogenic strains, is not recommended due to its association with an increased risk of hemolytic uremic syndrome, so therapeutic management should be guided by clinical and microbiological criteria.⁽³³⁾

Table 1. Marine bacteria associated with digestive disease in Brazil

Bacteria	Reservoir	Exposure	Digestive syndrome	Virulence	Incubation	Evidence in Brazil	Surveillance note
<i>Vibrio parahaemolyticus</i>	Warm waters, shellfish	Raw oysters	Acute gastroenteritis	TDH/TRH	4-96 hours	Isolated in oysters São Paulo	Higher risk in warm months
<i>Vibrio vulnificus</i>	Brackish waters	Raw shellfish	Watery diarrhea	Capsule	12-72 hours	Potential risk with bivalves	Caution in patients with liver disease
<i>Vibrio cholerae</i> non-O1/O139	Coastal waters	Seafood and water	Mild watery diarrhea	Hemolysins	12-72 hours	Specific environmental detections	Environmental monitoring
<i>Aeromonas</i> spp.	Estuarine waters	Fish/seafood	Watery or dysenteric diarrhea	Aerolisin	24-48 hours	Estuarine isolates	Can grow in cold conditions
<i>Plesiomonas shigelloides</i>	Marine/estuarine waters	Shellfish and fish	Self-limiting diarrhea	Enterotoxins	24-48 hours	Records from southeastern Brazil	Consider in post-seafood diarrhea
<i>E. coli</i>	Marine fecal contamination.	Bivalves	Variable diarrhea	Toxins	8-72 hours	Detected in mollusks	Fecal indicator
<i>Salmonella</i> spp.	Marine fecal contamination.	Contaminated shellfish	Gastroenteritis	Invasive species	6-72 hours	Found in fishery products	Hygiene control

Other vital pathogens: Enterococci are part of the lactic acid bacteria (LAB) and can be found in food. They are often present in foods of animal origin, such as meat, fermented and cooked meat, and cheese and dairy products.⁽³⁴⁾

Enterococci are considered opportunistic pathogens, representing the second most common cause of infections, particularly affecting the urinary tract, wounds, and soft tissues. They are resistant to antibiotics and have been found in various environments.⁽³⁵⁾

DISCUSSION

Gastrointestinal diseases associated with the marine environment continue to represent an emerging public health problem in Brazil, particularly in coastal areas with intense fishing and recreational activity.⁽³⁶⁾ Evidence shows that *Vibrio parahaemolyticus* is the marine pathogen most frequently associated with shellfish-related diarrhea, due to its high prevalence in oysters from the São Paulo coast and its ability to colonize warm environments with high surface water temperatures. This condition is prevalent in the southern Brazilian Atlantic.⁽³⁷⁾ These findings confirm the need for periodic microbiological surveillance of filter-feeding mollusks, especially during the summer, when higher temperatures favor the proliferation of vibrios.⁽³⁸⁾

On the other hand, although *Vibrio vulnificus* is more commonly associated with skin infections and septicemia in patients with liver disease, there is evidence that specific food exposures involving raw shellfish can also lead to gastroenteritis, which poses an additional risk to vulnerable populations.⁽³⁹⁾ Similarly, environmental strains of *Vibrio cholerae* have been detected on Brazilian coasts, where they can cause self-limiting diarrhea; this finding supports the marine environment as a natural reservoir of *V. cholerae*, even in the absence of classic cholera outbreaks.⁽⁴⁰⁾

Likewise, aquatic bacteria such as *Aeromonas* spp. and *Plesiomonas shigelloides* have been repeatedly isolated in estuarine and coastal environments in southern and southeastern Brazil, confirming their importance as etiological agents of aquatic diarrhea associated with contaminated seafood.⁽⁴¹⁾ Although less well known than *Vibrio*, these species are highly adaptable and persistent, capable of multiplying even at refrigeration temperatures, which is a critical factor in the post-harvest cold chain.⁽⁴²⁾

In coastal areas with urban impact, the detection of *E. coli* and *Salmonella* spp. Indicates significant human fecal contamination of these marine environments.⁽⁴³⁾ The presence of these enterobacteria is not only an indicator of the deterioration of the ecosystem's health but also poses a direct risk of gastroenteritis from the consumption of contaminated filter-feeding shellfish.⁽⁴⁴⁾ This fact is highly relevant for Brazil, as untreated sewage discharges remain a structural problem in many coastal municipalities.⁽⁴⁵⁾

In summary, the available data show that the Brazilian coast acts as a dynamic reservoir of bacterial agents with digestive pathogenic potential,⁽⁴⁶⁾ influenced by environmental, industrial, sanitary, and sociocultural factors related to the consumption of raw marine products.⁽⁴⁷⁾ Strengthening control measures, such as systematic microbiological monitoring, improving sanitary infrastructure,⁽⁴⁸⁾ mandatory purification of bivalves, and consumer education, could substantially reduce the risk to the population.⁽⁴⁹⁾

CONCLUSION

Information has been gathered, and the bacteria that cause digestive diseases present in seawater have been described.

In conclusion, gastrointestinal diseases related to exposure to seawater and the consumption of seafood on Brazilian beaches pose a real risk to Paraguayan tourists vacationing during the summer, mainly due to the circulation of bacteria such as *Vibrio parahaemolyticus*, *Aeromonas* spp., and *Plesiomonas shigelloides*.⁽⁵⁰⁾

As well as enterobacteria related to fecal contamination. Higher summer water temperatures, high tourist traffic, and the consumption of raw or undercooked seafood increase the likelihood of acute digestive infections during travel.^(51,52)

Therefore, it is essential to reinforce prevention and health education strategies to reduce the incidence of these diseases among vacationers. Recommendations include: choosing well-cooked fish and avoiding the consumption of raw seafood and oysters; opting for formal dining establishments with visible good hygiene practices, avoiding street vendors, consume safe drinking water and avoid beverages prepared with ice of unknown origin, maintain proper hand washing before eating or handling food, especially at the beach, consult a medical service early if you experience severe diarrhea, high fever, persistent vomiting, or signs of dehydration.

High-risk groups (pregnant women, older adults, people with chronic liver disease) should avoid seafood and raw fish altogether.

Promote pre-travel information campaigns by Paraguayan health institutions and tourist agencies that warn about microbiological risks at beaches and in seafood.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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