Mercury in Fish and Shellfish

EPA AND FDA ADVICE FOR:

- Women Who Might Become Pregnant.
- Women Who are Pregnant.
- Nursing Mothers.
- Young Children.

Fish and shellfish are an important part of a healthy diet. They contain high-quality protein and other needed nutrients, are low in saturated fat, and contain omega-3 fatty acids. A well-balanced diet that includes a variety of fish and shellfish can promote heart health and proper growth and development in children. Women and young children in particular should include fish or shellfish in their diets due to the many nutritional benefits.

However, nearly all fish and shellfish contain traces of mercury. For most people, the risk from mercury by eating fish and shellfish is not a health concern. Yet, some fish and shellfish contain higher levels of mercury that may harm an unborn baby or young child's developing nervous system. The risks from mercury in fish and shellfish depend on the amount of fish and shellfish eaten and the levels of mercury in the fish and shellfish. Therefore, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) are advising women who may become pregnant, pregnant women, nursing mothers, and young children to avoid some types of fish and eat fish and shellfish that are lower in mercury.

By following these 3 recommendations for selecting and eating fish or shellfish for women and young children.

- **Do not** eat shark, swordfish, king mackerel, or tilefish. They contain high levels of mercury.
- Eat up to 12 ounces (2 average meals) a week of a variety of fish and shellfish that are lower in mercury. These are shrimp, canned light tuna, salmon, pollock, and catfish.
- Another commonly eaten fish, albacore ("white") tuna has more mercury than canned light tuna. Eat no more than 6 ounces (one average meal) of albacore tuna per week.
- Check local advisories about the safety of fish caught by family and friends in your local lakes, rivers, and coastal areas. If no advice is available, eat up to 6 ounces (one average meal) per week of fish you catch from local waters. Do not consume any other fish during that week.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS:

"What is mercury and methylmercury?"

Mercury happens naturally in the environment and can also be released into the air through industrial pollution. Mercury falls from the air and can collect in streams and oceans and is turned into methylmercury in the water. It is this type of mercury that can be harmful to your unborn baby and young child. Fish absorb the methylmercury as they feed in these waters and so it builds up in them. It builds up more in some types of fish and shellfish than others, which is why the levels vary.

"I'm a woman who could have children but I'm not pregnant - so why should I be concerned about methylmercury?"

If you regularly eat types of fish that are high in methylmercury, it can collect in your blood stream over time. Methylmercury is removed from the body naturally, but it may take over a year for the levels to drop a lot. Thus, it may be present in a woman even before she becomes pregnant. This is the reason why women who are trying to become pregnant should also avoid eating certain types of fish.

"Is there methylmercury in all fish and shellfish?"

Nearly all fish and shellfish contain traces of methylmercury. However, larger fish that have lived longer have the highest levels of methylmercury because they have had more time to collect it. Large fish pose the greatest risk.

"I do not see the fish I eat in the advisory. What should I do?"
If you want more information about the levels in the various types of fish you eat, see the FDA food safety website www.cfsan.fda.gov/~frf/sea-mehg.html or the EPA website at www.epa.gov/ost/fish.

"What about fish sticks and fast food sandwiches?"
Fish sticks and "fast-food" sandwiches are commonly made from fish that are low in mercury.

"What if I eat more than the recommended amount of fish and shellfish in a week?"
One week's consumption of fish does not change the level of methylmercury in the body much at all. If you eat a lot of fish one week, you can cut back for the next week or two. Just make sure you average the recommended amount per week.

"Where do I get information about the safety of fish caught recreationally by family or friends?"
Before you go fishing, check your Fishing Regulations Booklet for information about recreationally caught fish. You can also contact your local health department for information about local advisories. You need to check local advisories because some kinds of fish and shellfish caught in your local waters may have higher or much lower than average levels of mercury. This depends on the levels of mercury in the water in which the fish are caught. Those fish with much lower levels may be eaten more often and in larger amounts.

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