



**U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency**



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## **Backgrounder for the 2004 FDA/EPA Consumer Advisory: What You Need to Know About Mercury in Fish and Shellfish**

### **Today's Action:**

- FDA and EPA are issuing a joint consumer advisory about mercury in fish and shellfish. The advice is for: women who might become pregnant; women who are pregnant; nursing mothers; and young children. This is significant because it is the first time FDA and EPA have combined their advice into a single uniform advisory. Previously FDA issued an advisory on consumption of commercially caught fish, while EPA issued advice on recreationally caught fish.
- FDA and EPA revised their existing advisories as a result of recommendations FDA received from its Foods Advisory Committee (FAC) in July 2002. At that meeting the FAC offered a number of recommendations intended to improve the clarity and understandability of the then current FDA advisory. One of the suggestions was that FDA and EPA combine their two independent advisories.
- The criteria for the advisory was that it be based on sound science; is easy to understand and apply; and protects the public health.
- The purpose of the advisory is to inform women who may become pregnant, pregnant women, nursing mothers and the parents of young children on how to get the positive health benefits from eating fish and shellfish, while minimizing their mercury exposure.

### **Message to Consumers:**

- Fish and shellfish are important parts of a healthy and balanced diet. They are good sources of high quality protein and other nutrients. However, depending on the amount and type of fish you consume it may be prudent to modify your diet if you are: planning to become pregnant; pregnant; nursing; or a young child. With a few simple adjustments, you can continue to enjoy these foods in a manner that is healthy and beneficial and reduce your unborn or young child's exposure to the harmful effects of mercury at the same time.

### **Key Parts of the Advisory:**

- Fish and shellfish are an important part of a healthy diet. Fish and shellfish contain high quality protein and other essential 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 contribute to heart health and children's proper growth and development. Thus, women and young children in particular should include fish or shellfish in their diets due to the many nutritional benefits.
  
- By following these 3 recommendations for selecting and eating fish or shellfish, women and young children will receive the benefits of eating fish and shellfish and be confident that they have reduced their exposure to the harmful effects of mercury.
  1. Do not eat Shark, Swordfish, King Mackerel, or Tilefish because they contain high levels of mercury.
  2. Eat up to 12 ounces (2 average meals) a week of a variety of fish and shellfish that are lower in mercury.
    - Five of the most commonly eaten fish that are low in mercury are shrimp, canned light tuna, salmon, pollock, and catfish.
    - Another commonly eaten fish, albacore ("white") tuna has more mercury than canned light tuna. So, when choosing your two meals of fish and shellfish, you may eat up to 6 ounces (one average meal) of albacore tuna per week.
  3. 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, but don't consume any other fish during that week.
  
- Follow these same recommendations when feeding fish and shellfish to your young child, but serve smaller portions.

### **The Difference Between This Advisory and Previous Advisories:**

1. The advisory emphasizes the positive benefits of eating fish.
2. The advisory provides examples of commonly eaten fish that are low in mercury.
3. The advisory for the first time specifically addresses canned light tuna and canned albacore ("white") tuna, as well as tuna steaks (in the questions and answers section).

4. The advisory recommends not to eat any other fish in the same week as locally caught fish are consumed (the advice on the amount of locally caught fish to eat is the same as in the 2001 EPA advisory).
5. The advisory contains a section that addresses frequently asked questions about mercury in fish.

### **What the Risk is:**

Research shows that most people's fish consumption does not cause a health concern. However, high levels of mercury in the bloodstream of unborn babies and young children may harm the developing nervous system. With this in mind, FDA and EPA designed an advisory that if followed should keep an individual's mercury consumption below levels that have been shown to cause harm. By following the advisory parents can be confident of reducing their unborn or young child's exposure to the harmful effects of mercury, while at the same time maintaining a healthy diet that includes the nutritional benefits of fish and shellfish.

### **General Methylmercury Information:**

- The methylmercury described in the advisory is not the same type of mercury found in some thermometers or in dental amalgam.
- Mercury is a naturally occurring element in the environment and is also released into the air through industrial pollution. Mercury that falls from the air can accumulate in streams and oceans. Bacteria in the water cause chemical changes that transform mercury into methylmercury. Fish absorb the methylmercury as they feed in these waters. Methylmercury builds up more in some fish than others depending on what they eat how long they live, and how high up the food chain they are.
- Fish and shellfish are the main sources of mercury exposure to humans and that mercury is in the form of methylmercury. Other forms of mercury, such as that in dental amalgams are minor contributors to human mercury exposure.

### **General Dietary Advice:**

- FDA recommends that consumers eat a balanced diet, choosing a variety of foods including fruits and vegetables, foods that are low in *trans* fat and saturated fat, as well as foods rich in high fiber grains and nutrients. Fish and shellfish can be an important part of this diet.

### **What's Next:**

- FDA and EPA want to ensure that women and young children continue to eat fish and shellfish because of the nutritional benefits and encourage them to follow the advisory so they can be confident in reducing their mercury exposure as well.
- FDA and EPA are planning a comprehensive educational campaign to reach: women who might become pregnant; pregnant women; nursing mothers; and young children. The agencies will work with state, local and tribal health departments to get information out into their communities. Physicians, other health professionals, and health care associations will be sent information to distribute through their offices. Extensive outreach through the media is also planned. Radio and television stations, health editors at newspapers, magazines, and other popular media will be contacted to encourage them to carry the public service message. The methylmercury advisory will also be an important part of a comprehensive food safety education program to be used by educators of pregnant women. FDA plans to launch the comprehensive education program later this year.
- EPA and FDA have begun discussions on how to coordinate other scientific assessments involving fish.

### **Other:**

- FDA and EPA tested different versions of the revised advisory in 16 focus groups in 7 different locations throughout the United States. Based on responses we received we modified the advisory so that it is more easily understood.
  - In December 2003, after 8 focus groups had been conducted, a draft of the revised advisory was presented to the Foods Advisory Committee. Based on their feedback we conducted 8 additional focus groups and modified the advisory according to the feedback we received. The result is the 2004 FDA/EPA Consumer Advisory: "What You Need to Know About Mercury in Fish and Shellfish".
- Since July 2002 FDA has tested over 3400 cans of tuna as well as 227 fish samples, comprising 12 different species, for mercury. These results were added to our previous sampling results.
- FDA continues to sample fish and shellfish, testing for mercury.

**For More Information:**

For more information about the risks of mercury in fish and shellfish call the FDA's Food Information Hotline toll-free at 1-888-SAFEFOOD or visit FDA's Food Safety website at [www.cfsan.fda.gov/seafood1.html](http://www.cfsan.fda.gov/seafood1.html). For more information about the safety of locally caught fish and shellfish, visit the Environmental Protection Agency's Fish Advisory website at [www.epa.gov/ost/fish](http://www.epa.gov/ost/fish) or contact your state or local health department. Contact information for state and local health departments is also found at this site.