



CONSUMER ADVISORY

Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition, U.S. Food and Drug Administration

January 2001

AN IMPORTANT MESSAGE FOR PREGNANT WOMEN AND WOMEN

OF CHILDBEARING AGE WHO MAY BECOME PREGNANT

ABOUT THE RISKS OF MERCURY IN FISH

Seafood can be an important part of a balanced diet for pregnant women. It is a good source of high quality protein and other nutrients and is low in fat.

However, some fish contain high levels of a form of mercury called methylmercury that can harm an unborn child's developing nervous system if eaten regularly. By being informed about methylmercury and knowing the kinds of fish that are safe to eat, you can prevent any harm to your unborn child and still enjoy the health benefits of eating seafood.

HOW DOES MERCURY GET INTO FISH?

Mercury occurs naturally in the environment and it can also be released into the air through industrial pollution. Mercury falls from the air and can get into surface water, accumulating in streams and oceans. Bacteria in the water cause chemical changes that transform mercury into methylmercury that can be toxic. Fish absorb methylmercury from water as they feed on aquatic organisms.

HOW CAN I AVOID LEVELS OF MERCURY THAT COULD HARM MY UNBORN CHILD?

Nearly all fish contain trace amounts of methylmercury, which are not harmful to humans. However, long-lived, larger fish that feed on other fish accumulate the highest levels of methylmercury and pose the greatest risk to people who eat them regularly. You can protect your unborn child by not eating these large fish that can contain high levels of methylmercury:

- Shark
- Swordfish
- King mackerel
- Tilefish

While it is true that the primary danger from methylmercury in fish is to the developing nervous system of the unborn child, it is prudent for nursing mothers and young children not to eat these fish as well.

IS IT ALL RIGHT TO EAT OTHER FISH?

Yes. As long as you select a variety of other kinds of fish while you are pregnant or may become pregnant, you can safely enjoy eating them as part of a healthful diet. You can safely eat 12 ounces per week of cooked fish. A typical serving size of fish is from 3 to 6 ounces. Of course, if your serving sizes are smaller, you can eat fish more frequently. You can choose shellfish, canned fish, smaller ocean fish or farm-raised fish just pick a variety of different species.

WHAT IF I EAT MORE THAN 12 OUNCES OF FISH A WEEK?

There is no harm in eating more than 12 ounces of fish in one week as long as you don't do it on a regular basis. One week's consumption 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 the next week or two and be just fine. Just make sure you average 12 ounces of fish a week.

WHAT ABOUT THE FISH CAUGHT BY MY FAMILY OR FRIENDS IN FRESH WATER LAKES AND STREAMS? ARE THEY SAFE TO EAT?

There can be a risk of contamination from mercury in fresh waters from either natural or industrial causes that would make the fish unsafe for you or your family to eat. The Environmental Protection Agency provides current advice on fish consumption from fresh water lakes and streams. Also check with your state or local health department to see if there are special advisories on fish caught from waters in your local area.

For information about the risks of Mercury in Seafood call toll-free

1 (888) SAFEFOOD

U. S. Food and Drug Administration
Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition
Food Information Line
24 hours a day

Or Visit
FDA's Food Safety Website
www.cfsan.fda.gov

FURTHER INFORMATION IS ALSO AVAILABLE:

Environmental Protection Agency www.epa.gov/ost/fish

State or local health department

(A list of contacts is available at www.ipa.gov/ost/fish. Click on Federal, State, and Tribal Contacts for fish advisories.)

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January 12, 2001

Dear Colleague:

I am writing to inform you that the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has completed its review of the current advisory on methylmercury in fish. FDA has decided to issue a new advisory and initiate an education campaign to make pregnant women and women of childbearing age who may become pregnant aware of the possible hazard. The new advisory is enclosed. This advisory is part of the overall public health strategy for methylmercury in commercial seafood being developed this year.

Finally, I want to thank you and your organization for your contributions and taking the time to participate in these important meetings on methylmercury as we undertook a review of this important public health issue. I ask your continued assistance in helping us provide this important message to consumers.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Joseph A. Levitt".

Joseph A. Levitt
Director
Center for Food Safety
and Applied Nutrition