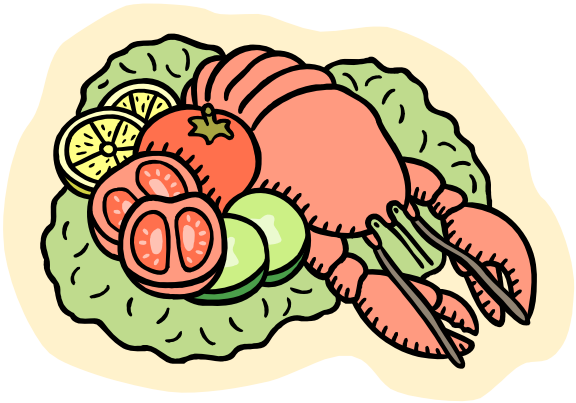
FISH CONSUMPTION



March 19, 2004 -- To protect developing babies from high levels of potentially brain-damaging mercury, the government issued guidelines today to warn women who are pregnant, nursing, or even considering having children to eat no more than two servings of fish each week.

The FDA and the Environmental Protection Agency jointly issued the new guidelines, but they are still emphasizing the benefits of eating fish. They say that fish and shellfish can be important parts of a healthy and balanced diet. They are good sources of high-quality protein and other essential nutrients, such as heart-healthy omega-3 fatty acids.

However, as a matter of prudence, they are recommending that women who are pregnant or nursing, planning to become pregnant, or feeding a young child limit the amount of fish they eat and eat fish with low mercury levels.

Where Does Mercury Come From?

Mercury occurs naturally in the environment and can also be released into the air through industrial pollution. Mercury falls from the air and can accumulate in streams and oceans, where it is turned into methylmercury. It is this type of mercury that can be harmful, especially to the developing brain of an unborn baby or young child. Fish absorb the methylmercury as they feed in these waters. It builds up more in some types of fish and shellfish than others, depending on what the fish eat.

If you regularly eat types of fish that are high in methylmercury, it can accumulate in your bloodstream over time. Methylmercury is removed from the body naturally, but it may take over a year for the levels to drop significantly, according to the FDA. Thus, it may be present in a woman even before she becomes pregnant.

Seafood Recommendations

By following their recommendations and guidelines, government officials say that women will receive the benefits of eating fish and shellfish and be confident that they have reduced their exposure to the harmful effects of mercury.

- Do not eat shark, swordfish, king mackerel, or tilefish because they contain high levels of mercury.
- Eat up to 12 ounces (two average meals) a week of a variety of fish and shellfish that are lower in mercury. Five of the most commonly eaten fish and shellfish 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 six ounces (one average meal) of albacore tuna per week, they say.
- Because tuna steak generally contains higher levels of mercury than canned light tuna, when choosing your two meals of fish and shellfish, you may eat up to 6 ounces (one average meal) of tuna steak per week.
- Fish sticks and "fast-food" sandwiches are commonly made from fish that are low in mercury.

Officials also say you should 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 six 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.

"This revised advisory is a culmination of months of hard work by both agencies," said FDA Deputy Commissioner Lester M. Crawford, DVM, PhD. "By following this advice, we're confident that women and young children can safely include fish as an important part of a healthy diet."

SOURCE: FDA.

AN IMPORTANT MESSAGE FOR PREGNANT WOMEN AND WOMEN OF CHILDBEARING AGE WHO MAY BECOME PREGNANT ABOUT THE RISKS OF MERCURY IN FISH*

This document also available in Spanish.

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.

Some kinds of fish are known to have much lower than average levels of methylmercury and can be safely eaten more frequently and in larger amounts. Contact your federal,

state, or local health department or other appropriate food safety authority for specific consumption recommendations about fish caught or sold in your local area.

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