

Update For Top Tips From Spring 2006: THE FDA AND EPA ADVISE PREGNANT WOMEN AND CHILDREN TO EAT MORE LOW-MERCURY FISH

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Federal officials last year announced major changes in advice to pregnant and breastfeeding women by recommending consumption of at least 8 ounces of low-mercury fish per week.¹ It is the first time that the EPA and FDA have issued recommendations on the minimum amount of fish that pregnant women and children should eat. The previous advisory, issued in 2004, included only maximum amounts to protect their fetuses and young children from mercury, which can harm developing brains and reduce IQ's.

"Eating fish with lower levels of mercury provides numerous health and dietary benefits," Nancy Stoner, the EPA's acting assistant administrator for the Office of Water, said in a statement. "This updated advice will help pregnant women and mothers make informed decisions about the right amount and right kinds of fish to eat during important times in their lives and their children's lives." FDA officials said their analysis of data from more than 1000 pregnant women found that 21% ate no fish in the previous month. Those who did, ate less than the amount recommended by the USDA's Dietary Guidelines for Americans.

Under the long-awaited, proposed new guidelines, pregnant and breastfeeding women are advised to eat a minimum of 8 ounces and no more than 12 ounces of fish with low levels of methylmercury, including shrimp, pollock, salmon, canned light tuna, tilapia, catfish and cod. That is equivalent to two or three servings per week. Young children, according to the advisory, also should have two or three smaller servings of low-mercury fish, 3 to 6 ounces per week. Studies have linked pregnant women's high mercury consumption in seafood to reduce IQ's and memories and other neurological effects in their children.²

As in the old recommendations, pregnant and nursing women and young children are advised to avoid four high-mercury fish: tilefish from the Gulf

of Mexico, shark, swordfish and king mackerel. The agencies also reiterated their specific recommendations for limits on albacore (or white) tuna: no more than 6 ounces a week for pregnant and breastfeeding women. Children, they say, should eat no more than 1 to 4 ounces of albacore tuna weekly. Advice about consumption of tuna has been highly controversial, with the fishing industry criticizing limits and health advocacy groups pushing for the FDA and EPA to add it to the list of fish to avoid. When asked about high levels of mercury in light tuna, Dr. Stephen Ostroff, the FDA's chief scientist, said that the agencies included only four fish on the "do not eat" list because "they have consistently shown higher levels of methylmercury." "We will continue to look at levels of methylmercury in a variety of fish and in the future make recommendations about other fish as well," he said. Orange roughy and marlin also have slightly higher concentrations of mercury than most fish, added Elizabeth Southerland, EPA's director of the Office of Science and Technology. A significant portion of mercury in fish is from coal burning power plants.

Environmentalists said they were disappointed by the proposed changes, mostly because of the lack of warning labels on canned tuna. "Over one-third of American's exposure to methylmercury is from tuna, because tuna are higher-mercury fish and Americans consume so much," said Michael Bender, director of the Mercury Policy Project. "Albacore 'white' canned tuna generally has three times as much mercury as 'light' tuna. However, Americans consume about three times as much of the light variety, which is less-expensive, with the result that each variety—'white' and 'light'—contributes a staggering 16 percent of Americans' dietary exposure to mercury."

For wild fish, EPA officials warned recreational and subsistence fishers to follow all local advisories,

and if there is no posted advisory, to limit consumption to 6 ounces per week for women, and 1 to 3 ounces for children—with the added precaution not to eat any other fish that week. (A 3-ounce piece of fish is about the size of a checkbook.)

Locally the PA Department of Environmental Protection states that catfish in the Susquehanna River over 20 inches long show unacceptable levels of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCB's). Mercury levels found in rock bass are high in the Conestoga Creek.

REFERENCES

1. www.FDA.gov/Food/FoodborneIllnessContaminants/Metals/ucm393070.htm
 2. www.FDA.gov/Food/FoodborneIllnessContaminants/Metals/ucm396789.htm
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