



## CONSUMER ADVISORY

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

March 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.

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  
24 hours a day**

**Or visit  
FDA's Food Safety Website  
[www.cfsan.fda.gov](http://www.cfsan.fda.gov)**

#### **FURTHER INFORMATION IS ALSO AVAILABLE:**

Environmental Protection Agency [www.epa.gov/ost/fish](http://www.epa.gov/ost/fish)

State or local health department

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