

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. So, women and young children in particular should include fish or shellfish in their diets due to the many nutritional benefits.

However, nearly all fish and shellfish contain traces of mercury. For most people, the risk from mercury by eating fish and shellfish is not a health concern. Yet, some fish and shellfish contain higher levels of mercury that may harm an unborn baby or young child's developing nervous system.

The risks from mercury in fish and shellfish depend on the amount of fish and shellfish eaten and the levels of mercury in the fish and shellfish. Therefore, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) are advising women who may become pregnant, pregnant women, nursing mothers and young children to avoid some types of fish and eat fish and shellfish that are lower in mercury.

Information provided by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.



SAFETY TIPS FOR FISH OR SHELLFISH CONSUMPTION:

Follow these 3 recommendations for fish or shellfish consumption:

1. Avoid eating shark, swordfish, king mackerel and tilefish, as 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.

Low-mercury fish

- shrimp
- salmon
- canned light tuna
- pollock
- catfish

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.

Frequently Asked Questions about Mercury in Fish and Shellfish:

What is mercury and methylmercury?

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 and is turned into methylmercury in the water. It is this type of mercury that can be harmful to your unborn baby. Fish absorb the methylmercury as they feed in these waters. The levels vary depending on what the fish eat. Mercury builds up in some types of fish and shellfish more than others.

I'm a woman who could have children but I'm not pregnant - so why should I be concerned about methylmercury?

If you regularly eat types of fish that are high in methylmercury, it can accumulate in your blood stream over time. Methylmercury is removed from the body naturally, but it may take over a year for levels to drop significantly. Thus, it may be present in a woman even before she becomes pregnant. Women who are trying to become pregnant should also avoid eating certain types of fish.

What if I eat more than the recommended amount in a week?

One week's consumption of fish 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 for the next week or two. Just make sure you average the recommended amount per week.

Where do I get info about the safety of fish caught recreationally?

Before you go fishing, check your fishing regulations booklet for information about recreationally caught fish. You can also contact your local health department for information about local advisories. You need to check local advisories because some kinds of fish and shellfish caught in your local waters may have higher or much lower than average levels of mercury. This depends on the levels of mercury in the water in which the fish are caught. Those fish with much lower levels may be eaten more frequently and in larger amounts.

I don't see the fish I eat in the advisory. What should I do?

If you want more information about the levels in the various types of fish you eat, see the FDA food safety website or the EPA website at www.epa.gov/ost/fish.

What about fish sticks and fast food sandwiches?

Fish sticks and fast food sandwiches are commonly made from fish that are low in mercury.

The advice about canned tuna is in the advisory, but what's the advice about tuna steaks?

Because tuna steak generally contains higher levels of mercury than canned light tuna, you may eat up to 6 ounces (one average meal) of tuna steak per week.

Is there methylmercury in all fish and shellfish?

Nearly all fish and shellfish contain traces of methylmercury. However, larger fish that have lived longer have the highest levels of methylmercury because they've had more time to accumulate it. These large fish (swordfish, shark, king mackerel and tilefish) pose the greatest risk. Other types of fish and shellfish may be eaten in the amounts recommended by FDA and EPA.

Note: If you have questions or think you've been exposed to large amounts of methylmercury, see your doctor or health care provider immediately.

For further information about the risks of mercury in fish and shellfish call the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's food information line toll-free at 1-888-SAFEFOOD or visit FDA's Food Safety website.

or further information about the safety of locally caught fish and shellfish, visit the Environmental Protection Agency's Fish Advisory website or contact your state or local health department. A list of state or local health department contacts is available. Click on federal, state, and tribal Contacts. For information on EPA's actions to control mercury, visit EPA's mercury website.