



Plumas County Environmental Health

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MERCURY IN FISH FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What is mercury?

Mercury is a type of metal found in soil, rock, air and water. It is used in thermometers, batteries, lamps, and other products. Some industries release mercury into the air, soil, and water.

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 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.

Can I eat the fish from stores or restaurants?

Most fish that you buy in stores or restaurants are very safe. But even these fish may contain mercury. For all fish and shellfish you buy, follow the guidelines listed above.

What about fish that family or friends catch?

Fish from some areas of California have mercury or other chemicals in them. These areas have warnings called "health advisories." Health advisories tell you the kinds and amounts of fish that are safe to eat. Always follow the health advisory for the areas where your fish were caught. If there is no advisory, follow the guideline listed above.

For more information about health advisories, contact:

California Environmental Protection Agency Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment/Pesticide and Environmental Toxicology Section at:

916-327-7319 or 510-622-3170

or you can visit their website at

www.oehha.ca.gov/fish.html

The California Department of Fish and Game Fishing Regulations booklet:

These are available where you buy your fishing license

or you can visit their website at

www.dfg.ca.gov/enforcement/regs.html