

## **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 it is low in fat.

However, some fish contain high levels of a form of mercury called methyl mercury that can harm an unborn child's developing nervous system, if it is eaten regularly. By being informed about methyl mercury 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 methyl mercury that can be toxic. Fish absorb methyl mercury from the 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 methyl mercury, which are not harmful to humans. However, long-lived, larger fish that feed on other fish accumulate the highest levels of methyl mercury 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 methyl mercury:

**Shark**  
**Swordfish**  
**King Mackerel**  
**Tilefish**

While it is true that the primary danger from methyl mercury 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 Alright 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 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 do not do it on a regular basis. One week's consumption does not change the level of methyl mercury 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 methyl mercury 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 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.

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For further information Visit

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

Environmental Protection Agency [www.epa.gov/ost/fish](http://www.epa.gov/ost/fish)- Click on Federal, State and Tribal Contacts for Fish advisories.

The Food and Drug Administration says pregnant women should not eat the first four fish on the list at all.

Almost every type of fish has some mercury. These are some of the more popular varieties, listed with their average (mean) amount of mercury.

Other types have also been ranked, but many of those measurements are based on only small numbers of fish, so they have not been included.

<b><u>Variety</u></b>	<b><u>Parts per Million (mean)</u></b>
1. Tilefish	1.45
2. Swordfish	1.0
3. Shark	0.96
4. King Mackerel	0.73
5. Red Snapper	0.60
6. Grouper	0.43
7. Tuna (fresh or frozen)	0.32
8. Tuna (canned)	0.17
9. Lobster	0.31
10. Halibut	0.23
11. Catfish	0.07
12. Scallop	0.05
13. Salmon	No Data
14. Oysters	No Data

The FDA is always in the process of re-evaluating this information and will post updates as new information becomes available.

This information was obtained from the FDA Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition, U.S. Food and Drug Administration March 2001