

September 14, 2006

Fish Consumption: Benefits and Risks to the Vulnerable

Toronto Public Health submitted a report to the Board of Health entitled *Fish Consumption: Benefits and Risks for Women in Childbearing Years and Young Children*. This report summarizes the latest science on methylmercury levels in fish, a form of mercury that can be harmful to children, from in the womb to early childhood.

Fish has many important health and nutritional benefits:

- It is an excellent source of protein, and is low in saturated fat and cholesterol
- It is an important source of essential nutrients, especially omega-3 fatty acids
- Omega-3 fatty acids are important to heart health and brain function and development

However, due to concerns about exposure to methylmercury, a form of mercury that is especially harmful to the brain of the developing fetus, infant and young child, Toronto Public Health is advising that pregnant women should not eat more than two servings (170 grams or 6 ounces) each week of fish with low concentrations of mercury. Women who may become pregnant should take the same precautions. Young children should only consume two half-portion servings a week of fish with low mercury concentrations.

According to current data, some examples of fish with low levels of mercury include:

- wild and canned salmon
- herring
- mackerel (except King mackerel)
- sardines
- trout
- catfish
- pollock
- tilapia

Consumption of these species of fish is also considered ecologically sustainable.

Health Canada is currently reviewing its own fish consumption advisory from 2002. This advisory warns that pregnant women, women in childbearing years, and young children should not eat fish with high levels of mercury, such as shark, swordfish and fresh or frozen tuna, more than once a month. These types of larger, predatory species live longer than smaller fish and have higher concentrations of mercury.

Research on the health risks to these vulnerable populations from mercury exposure suggests that a more precautionary approach is necessary. Toronto Public Health recommends that women in childbearing years, pregnant and nursing women and young children avoid eating fish with high levels of mercury, when possible.

Toronto Public Health also recommends that pregnant women and young children consume certain kinds of canned tuna in moderation. Canned tuna can be a healthy, affordable fish choice; however, mercury content is quite different depending on the type of tuna.

Light canned tuna (skipjack species) is a medium mercury content fish, therefore:

- Pregnant (or breastfeeding) women and young children should eat only one can per week.

Canned white or albacore tuna, is moderately high in mercury, therefore:

- Pregnant (or breastfeeding) women and young children should avoid or eat only rarely (that is, less than once per month)

Toronto Public Health is urging the federal government to:

- require that fish retailers and restaurants make Health Canada's fish advisories available to consumers so they can better identify fish with high levels of mercury.
- increase their fish testing, including more testing of canned tuna, and to make mercury test results available to local health units.
- expand its testing to include a greater range of imported fish species. Imported species are a main staple in some cultures, and more information is needed on how to avoid fish with high levels of mercury.

Further information on the mercury content of fish can be found at: www.toronto.ca/health, as well as from websites for Health Canada and the United States Environmental Protection Agency.