

Media Release



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18 March 2004

FSANZ updates advice on mercury in fish (Australia only)

Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) today released updated advice on mercury in fish. The revised advice has been extended to provide not just advice for pregnant women, and women considering pregnancy, but also for young children and the general population.

The Australian Dietary Guidelines advise eating one or two fish meals per week for good health. The good news is that FSANZ has found it is safe for all population groups to eat 2-3 serves per week of most types of fish. There are only a few types of fish, which FSANZ recommends limiting in the diet – these are billfish (swordfish / broadbill and marlin), shark/flake, orange roughy and catfish.

FSANZ advises that pregnant women, women planning pregnancy and young children continue to consume a variety of fish as part of a healthy diet but limit their consumption of certain species.

Pregnant women, women planning pregnancy and young children should limit their intake of shark (flake), broadbill, marlin and swordfish to no more than one serve per fortnight with no other fish to be consumed during that fortnight. For orange roughy (also sold as sea perch) and catfish, the advice is to consume no more than one serve per week, with no other fish being consumed during that week.

FSANZ's Chief Scientist, Dr Marion Healy, said 'Our investigations show that the level of mercury in most fish caught and sold in Australia is low. This means we can all continue to enjoy the many benefits from eating fish without concern. Fish is an excellent source of protein for all people, it is low in saturated fats and high in the 'good' unsaturated fat and omega 3 oils and is an excellent source of iodine. Because of this it is important that women in particular continue to eat fish during pregnancy.

However, some types of fish, usually those large species that are at the top of the food chain or that live a long time, may accumulate higher levels of mercury. We therefore advise against eating too much of these types of fish. This advice is particularly important for pregnant women and those women intending to become pregnant because the unborn baby is more vulnerable to the harmful effects of mercury.

'The effects in babies exposed to high levels of mercury in the womb are subtle and only found using sensitive testing. They include, for example, lower scores on tests that measure attention, learning and memory. Very little mercury from fish is transferred to breast milk so the risk to the nursing infant is much lower, however, breastfeeding mothers may still wish to follow the advice for pregnant women.

'While it is safe to eat limited amounts of the higher mercury fish, if you wish to maximise the nutritional benefit of fish by consuming it more regularly, it is preferable to select fish from the wide variety of other species available that are much lower in their mercury content.

'It is essential that people not interpret this as advice to stop or reduce their consumption of fish. It is in the interests of their health to eat fish on a regular basis, but pregnant women and young children should limit consumption of those species of fish with high mercury levels,' Dr Healy concluded.

More information can be found on FSANZ's website www.foodstandards.gov.au . Copies of the brochure are available by contacting the Information Officer on 02 6271 2621 or by email info@foodstandards.gov.au .

TV CHIEFS OF STAFF PLEASE NOTE: A video news release will be distributed at 10am on Thursday 18 March 2004 from Sky Sydney.

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Attachment:

Number of serves of different types of fish that can be safely consumed

Pregnant women and women planning pregnancy 1 serve equals 150 grams[#]	Children (up to 6 years) 1 serve equals 75 grams[#]	Rest of the population 1 serve equals 150 grams[#]
2 – 3 serves per week of any fish and seafood not listed below		2 – 3 serves per week of any fish and seafood not listed in the column below
OR		OR
1 serve per week of Orange Roughy (Sea Perch) or Catfish and no other fish that week		1 serve per week of Shark (Flake) or Billfish (Swordfish / Broadbill and Marlin) and no other fish that week
OR		
1 serve per fortnight of Shark (Flake) or Billfish (Swordfish / Broadbill and Marlin) and no other fish that fortnight		

A 150 gram serve for adults and older children is equivalent to approximately 2 frozen crumbed fish portions.

A 75 gram serve for children is approximately 3 fish fingers (Hake or Hoki is used in fish fingers).

Canned fish is sold in various sizes; for example, the snack size cans of tuna are approximately 95 grams.

NOTE

The Australian Dietary Guidelines advise eating one or two fish meals per week

If you are in doubt about the type of fish or boneless fish fillets you are purchasing, FSANZ recommends that you ask the retailer and confirm the name of the fish being supplied. This also applies when eating out.

FACTS ABOUT MERCURY

Mercury occurs naturally in the environment and accumulates in the aquatic food chain, including fish, as methylmercury. This means all fish will contain some methylmercury. Because of this, fish is the main source of methylmercury in the diet for most people.

The good news is that the level of methylmercury in most fish is very low. As most people consume only moderate amounts of fish, the benefits of eating fish far outweigh the risk posed by the small amount of methylmercury present. Regulations are also in place that set a limit on the amount of mercury that can be present in fish that is sold.

The amount of methylmercury in fish depends on how long the fish lives and what it eats. The big, long living or predatory fish, such as swordfish and shark/flake, tend to accumulate higher levels of methylmercury.

High levels of methylmercury can damage the nervous system. Unborn babies are particularly vulnerable because their brains are developing very rapidly. Some studies of populations that eat large amounts of fish have reported a link between consumption of fish by mothers and subtle developmental delays in their children. These changes could only be detected using special tests that measure learning and behaviour. In contrast, for adults, the first sign of excessive exposure to methylmercury is usually numbness and tingling in the fingers, lips and toes. Effects in adults occur at much higher levels of intake than that linked to effects in children following exposure in the womb.

ANSWERS TO COMMON QUESTIONS

Mercury in Fish

1. Should I be eating fish at all leading up to or during pregnancy?

Yes. Fish is a highly nutritious food. Fish is an excellent source of high quality protein, is rich in important vitamins and minerals such as vitamin D and iodine, as well as the omega-3 fatty acids. These nutrients provide important health benefits both to you and the developing baby.

By being informed about mercury and knowing the kinds of fish to limit in your diet, you can prevent any harm to your unborn child and still enjoy the health benefits of eating fish. See the table 'Advice on Fish Consumption' for guidance on the types of fish to limit in your diet if you are pregnant or planning pregnancy.

2. Should I be concerned about mercury if I am breast-feeding my baby?

No. The benefits of breastfeeding your baby far outweighs any risk posed by the small amount of mercury that may be present in breast milk.

The critical time for the baby is while it is still developing in the womb. This is why FSANZ recommends that women start to limit their exposure to mercury from fish prior to pregnancy. By doing this it means you will reduce the amount of mercury in your body before getting pregnant. If you have limited your exposure to mercury up to and during pregnancy, the amount of mercury transferred through breast milk will be very low. As a precaution however you might like to consider limiting your mercury exposure while breastfeeding. Simply follow the same advice as for pregnant women.

3. Should I be giving young children fish to eat?

Yes. Fish is a highly nutritious food. Fish is an excellent source of high quality protein, is rich in important vitamins and minerals such as vitamin D and iodine, as well as the omega-3 fatty acids. These nutrients provide important health benefits for young children because of their growth and development needs.

But remember, the Australian Dietary Guidelines recommend that a variety of foods be consumed. See the table 'Advice on Fish Consumption' for guidance on the types of fish to limit in your children's diet, noting the smaller serving size for young children (75 grams per serve).

4. Isn't swordfish supposed to be a good source of omega-3 fatty acids?

Yes. Swordfish contains high levels of omega-3 fatty acids but a number of other fish – such as mackerel, herrings, sardines, silver warehou, atlantic salmon, canned salmon and canned tuna (especially canned tuna in oil) are also good sources of omega-3 fatty acids. These fish have much lower mercury levels compared to swordfish, therefore they may be eaten more frequently (e.g. 2-3 times per week).

5. Is canned tuna safe to eat regularly?

Yes. In general, it is safe for all population groups, including pregnant women, to consume 2-3 serves of any type of tuna per week (canned or fresh). Canned tuna generally has lower levels of mercury than other tuna because the tuna used for canning are smaller species that are generally caught when less than 1 year old. FSANZ has calculated that it is safe for all population groups to consume a snack can of tuna (95 grams) everyday, assuming no other fish is eaten. But remember, the Australian Dietary Guidelines recommend that a variety of foods be consumed.

6. Does processing or cooking reduce the mercury content of fish?

No. The mercury content of fish is not reduced by processing techniques such as canning or freezing or by cooking.

7. What if I only like eating shark/flake?

The advice to moderate fish intake relates mainly to the large fish, like shark/flake and billfish (including swordfish, broadbill and marlin). If your favourite fish is flake remember FSANZ's advice to limit intake and instead consider eating a variety of other types of fish. Note that flake should not be confused with hake, which is a small white fish that does not have higher mercury levels.

8. What if I like to eat more than 2-3 serves of fish per week?

Like all foods, fish should be eaten as part of a varied and balanced diet. Over-consumption of any single food group, particularly to the exclusion of other foods, is not recommended because it can lead to dietary imbalances and may increase your intake of potentially harmful substances in food, such as mercury. If you do eat more than 2-3 serves of fish per week, it is important that you eat a variety of fish, and that you avoid those fish with the high mercury levels such as shark/flake and billfish. This is especially important if you are pregnant or intending to become pregnant.

9. What about fish oil products?

Fish oil products and supplements are not a major source of dietary mercury and there is no recommendation to restrict intake of these products on the basis of mercury content.

10. Is other seafood such as crustacea or molluscs a concern?

No. Crustacea (including prawns, lobsters, and crabs) and molluscs (including oysters and calamari) generally contain lower levels of mercury than finfish. Also crustacea and molluscs tend not be consumed as frequently. Overall this means they are not a significant source of mercury for the average consumer. However, if you consume large amounts of these foods on a regular basis, they may contribute significantly to your mercury exposure.

Food Standards Australia New Zealand has prepared this advice based on the latest scientific information available to inform consumers about the presence of mercury in fish and to provide guidance on safe fish consumption.

The details of the advice given for other countries may vary because the risk of mercury exposure from the diet depends on the environment in that country, the type of fish commonly caught and eaten, the patterns of fish consumption and the consumption of other foods that may also contain mercury.

The FSANZ 'Advice on Fish Consumption' has been specifically developed for the Australian population and reflects local knowledge of our diets, the fish we eat and their mercury content.