



Seafood good. Mercury bad.

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Fish and shellfish are good

for your health and for the growth and development of children, especially before

they are born. In fact, everyone should eat seafood! Its many benefits include being a great source of protein and other nutrients, being low in saturated fat and rich in healthy omega-3 fatty acids.

Still, there are a few types of seafood that we need to be cautious with. Specifically, some fish and shellfish contains amounts of mercury that could harm an unborn baby or young child's developing nervous system. But, before anyone panics and runs off screaming that seafood is bad for you, let's have a look at what this really means.

Mercury is a naturally-occurring element found in soil and rocks, and in lakes, streams and oceans. In addition to natural sources, mercury is also released into the environment by human activities such as burning coal and other fossil fuels, mining and manufacturing.

Mercury in the water is usually inorganic, but there is a bacteria that can transform it into an organic form, methylmercury. This form is more dangerous because it is more toxic, and because it "bio-accumulates" in fish tissue.

Because of this, the higher in the food chain is the fish, the more likely it is to have higher levels of methylmercury.

Nearly all fish and shellfish contain traces of mercury. For most people, however, the risk is not a health concern. Still, some contain higher levels that could harm a fetus or baby. Health Canada established a guideline of 0.5 parts per million (ppm) for mercury in commercial fish. This was set in the 1970s and recent

re-evaluation shows that it is still considered an appropriate limit. In contrast, the EPA in the U.S. sets a level of 1.0 ppm, twice as much.

What should we eat wholeheartedly, and what should we watch out for? Seafoods low in mercury include "light" canned tuna (usually Skipjack or Yellowfin) and canned salmon (usually wild Pacific salmon) — read the label. Cod, haddock, halibut, herring, snapper, sole, squid and trout are all low in mercury. Clams, oysters, scallops and shrimp are equally safe. As for breaded fish products like frozen fish sticks and "fast-food" fish sandwiches, they are made with low-mercury fish as well.

In the 'be cautious' category are food chain champs like tuna steaks (these come from very large tuna), pike, bass, swordfish, shark and marlin. Women who are pregnant or nursing, or who might become pregnant, should avoid these foods entirely. Others (adults) can eat one serving of these fish per month. Canned

white, albacore or bluefin tuna is okay to eat in limited quantity, no more than once a month for pregnant women and young children.

Fish and shellfish provide delicious and healthy menu choices for everyone. That some species may also be higher in methylmercury

means we should be cautious in making those menu choices and nothing more. For pregnant women and young children, the best option is to be more careful yet, but avoiding seafood is a "solution" that far outweighs the "problem."

As to the health benefits of seafood, consider also how it is prepared and eaten. After frying it and dousing it with mayonnaise, maybe it will have lost some of its benefits!

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