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Is mercury in fish a safety concern?

 Fish is an important source of high-quality protein, vitamins and minerals. FDA seafood specialists say that eating a variety of types of fish, the normal pattern of consumption, does not put any one in danger of mercury poisoning. It is when people eat fad diets - frequently eating only one type of food or a particular species of fish - that they put themselves at risk.

Pregnant women and women of childbearing age, who may become pregnant, however, are advised by FDA experts, to limit their consumption of shark and swordfish to no more than once a month. These fish have much higher levels of methyl mercury than other commonly consumed fish. Since the fetus may be more susceptible than the mother to the adverse effects of methyl mercury, FDA experts say that it is prudent to minimize the consumption of fish that have higher levels of methyl mercury, like shark and swordfish. This advice covers both pregnant women and women of childbearing age who might become pregnant, since the first trimester of pregnancy appears to be the critical period of exposure for the fetus. Dietary practices immediately before pregnancy would have a direct bearing on fetal exposure during the first trimester, the period of greatest concern.

FDA toxicologists have determined that for persons other than pregnant women and women of childbearing age who may become pregnant, regular consumption of fish species with methyl mercury levels around 1 part per million (ppm)--such as shark and swordfish--should be limited to about 7 ounces per week (about one serving) to stay below the acceptable daily intake for methyl mercury. For fish with levels averaging 0.5 ppm, regular consumption should be limited to about 14 ounces per week. Current evidence indicates that nursing women who follow this advice do not expose their infants to increased risk from methyl mercury.

Consumption advice is unnecessary for the top 10 seafood species, making up about 80 percent of the seafood market--canned tuna, shrimp, pollock, salmon, cod, catfish, clams, flatfish, crabs, and scallops. This is because the methyl mercury levels in these species are all less than 0.2 ppm and few people eat more than the suggested weekly limit of fish (2.2 pounds) for this level of methyl mercury contamination.

FDA's action level of 1 ppm for methyl mercury in fish was established to limit consumers' methyl mercury exposure to levels 10 times lower than the lowest levels associated with adverse effects. (paresthesia) observed in the poisoning incidents. FDA based its action level on the lowest level at which adverse effects were found to occur in adults. This is because the level of exposure was actually lower than the lowest level found to affect fetuses, affording them greater

protection.

Source: Excerpted from FDA Consumer, May 1995 update: Mercury in Fish:
Cause for Concern?

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