



Deadly Poisons From the Deep

Fish flesh today is badly contaminated with toxic chemicals that are known to cause cancer and brain degeneration and is also the most likely of all foods to make you sick from bacterial contamination.

Think Fish Is a Health Food? Think Again

Fish live in water that is so polluted, you would never dream of drinking it. But you're ingesting this toxic brew—bacteria, contaminants, heavy metals, and all—every time you eat fish.

Fish's bodies absorb toxic chemicals in the water around them, and the chemicals become more concentrated as they move up the food chain. Big fish eat little fish, with the bigger fish (such as tuna and salmon) absorbing chemicals from all the other fish they eat. Fish flesh stores contaminants, such as PCBs, which cause liver damage, nervous system disorders, and fetal damage; dioxins, also linked to cancer; radioactive substances like strontium 90; and other dangerous contaminants like cadmium, mercury, lead, chromium, and arsenic, which can cause health problems ranging from kidney damage and impaired mental development to cancer.^{1,2,3,4} These toxins are stored in the body fat of humans who eat fish and remain in their bodies for decades.⁵

Researchers at the University of Illinois found that fish-eaters with high levels of PCBs in their blood have difficulty recalling information that they learned just 30 minutes earlier.⁶

Seafood is also the number one cause of food poisoning in the United States.⁸ Seafood poisoning can result in extreme discomfort, kidney damage, nervous system damage, and even death.⁹

Seafood is also the number one cause of food poisoning in the United States. Many of our waterways are polluted with human and animal feces, and this waste carries dangerous bacteria like *E. coli*. So when we eat fish, we are exposing ourselves to the unnecessary risk of contracting a nasty bacterial illness that can lead to mild to extreme discomfort, nervous system damage, and even death.⁷

According to a report by the General Accounting Office, the seafood industry is dangerously underregulated. In fact, the Food and Drug Administration doesn't even bother to test most fish flesh for many well-known chemical and bacterial health hazards.¹⁰

It's the Mercury

Around the world, fish are accumulating toxic mercury in their flesh as a result of industrial pollution. Fish absorb and ingest the mercury and store it in their tissues. If you eat fish, your body will absorb mercury from the fish's flesh, and the accumulation of this toxin can lead to serious health problems. It is worth noting that fish consumption is the sole source of human exposure to this known poison.¹¹

Consumption of fish and other sea animals is the sole source of human exposure to methyl mercury. —New England Journal of Medicine (2003)¹²



Eating even small amounts of fish flesh can have a big impact on the levels of mercury in our blood. A study by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) revealed that women who ate fish just twice a week had blood mercury concentrations seven times higher than women who hadn't eaten fish in the previous month.¹³ Studies have also shown that a 140-pound woman will be 30 percent over the EPA cutoff for safe mercury levels if she eats just one 6-ounce can of white tuna each week.¹⁴

Mercury Is a Poison

Mercury is known to cause severe health problems for humans, including brain damage, memory loss, personality change, tremors, spontaneous abortion, and damage to a developing fetus.¹⁵ Mercury poisoning from eating fish can also cause fatigue and memory loss, which some doctors call "fish fog."¹⁶

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A study conducted by San Francisco physician Jane Hightower found that dozens of her patients had high levels of mercury in their bodies and many showed symptoms of mercury poisoning, including hair loss, fatigue, depression, difficulty concentrating, and headaches. She found that her patients' symptoms improved when they stopped eating fish.¹⁸ "[Mercury is] a documented poison. Wherever it's seen, it's been a problem," says Hightower.¹⁹

*"We found that if people eat fish, the mercury goes up. They stop eating fish, the mercury goes down. It's that simple ... It's a documented poison. Wherever it's seen, it's been a problem."
—Dr. Jane M. Hightower²¹*

Researchers have also shown that the mercury in marine animals can cause heart problems in humans who eat their flesh. A recent report released by the Research Institute of Public Health in Finland showed that men who have elevated levels of mercury in their blood from eating fish are roughly 1.5 times more likely to suffer from heart problems, including heart disease and heart attacks.²⁰

Toxic Flesh

Mercury isn't the only dangerous toxin in fish flesh—people who eat fish also ingest PCBs. As big fish eat little fish, PCBs become more concentrated in their flesh. Fish-eaters who ingest these dangerous chemicals suffer from increased cancer risk and may experience decreased mental functioning and damaged sexual health.

Fish can concentrate extremely high levels of chemical residues in their flesh and fat, as much as 9 million times that of the water in which they live.²²

Researchers at the University of Illinois found that fish-eaters with high levels of PCBs in their blood have difficulty recalling information that they learned just 30 minutes earlier.²⁴

PCBs, or polychlorinated biphenyls, are synthetic chemicals that were once used in hydraulic fluids and oils and electrical capacitors and transformers. These toxins were banned in the United States in 1979 for use in all but completely enclosed areas, but heavy past usage has resulted in environmental contamination worldwide, especially in fish. PCBs are dangerous because they act like hormones, wreaking havoc on the nervous system and contributing to a variety of illnesses, including cancer, infertility, and other sexual problems.²³

PCBs are absorbed into the bodies of fish. Bigger fish who eat smaller fish accumulate greater and greater concentrations of PCBs in their flesh and can reach levels that may be many thousands of times higher than the PCB levels in the water itself, which most people would never think of drinking.²⁵ One bottle-nose dolphin had PCB levels of 2,000 parts per million (ppm)—40 times the amount required for hazardous waste disposal.²⁶ Inuit natives, whose diets consist largely of fish, have been found with PCB levels of 15.7 ppm in their fat, far higher concentrations than the maximum amount considered to be safe in fish by the EPA (.094 ppm). Nearly all Inuit have PCB levels far above guideline levels that health officials consider safe, and some Inuit have ingested so much contamination from fish that their

breast milk and body tissues would be classified as hazardous waste.²⁷ In the United States in 2002, 38 states issued fish consumption advisories because of high PCB levels.²⁸

PCBs Will Make You Stupid

Dr. Susan L. Schantz of the University of Illinois College of Veterinary Medicine has been studying fish-eaters since 1992 and has found that people who ate 24 pounds or more of fish per year have problems with learning and memory. (On average, people around the world consume 40 pounds of fish per year.)²⁹ She found that fish-eaters often have high levels of PCBs in their blood and thus have difficulty recalling information they learned just 30 minutes earlier.

Says Schantz, "It had been assumed that mature adults are less susceptible [to PCBs] than are developing fetuses. This may not be the case." Some fish-eaters in her study had high levels of lead, mercury, and DDE (formed when DDT breaks down) in their blood. Even low concentrations of lead can cause mental retardation and physical disability in children. Higher levels can lead to learning disabilities, behavioral problems, seizures, and even death.³⁰

Fish-eaters in one study had high levels of lead, mercury, and DDE in their blood. Even low concentrations of lead can cause mental retardation and physical disability in children. Higher levels can lead to coma, convulsions, and death.³¹

Fish Farming: Making Fish Flesh Even More Toxic

Because salmon are becoming so rare in the wild, 80 percent of the salmon consumed in America today come from massive fish farms.³² These farmed fish are actually fed the flesh of wild-caught fish. It takes 5 pounds of commercially caught fish (all species that would not be saleable to humans) to create a pound of farmed fish.³³ All that commercially netted fish comes with heavy doses of toxins, as discussed above, which then concentrate in the flesh of farmed fish, making it the most toxic thing that humans routinely put into their bodies. Farmed salmon also have twice the fat of wild salmon, and this fat collects even more toxins.³⁴ Tests on farmed salmon purchased at U.S. grocery stores show that these fish are contaminated with even more PCBs than their wild counterparts.³⁵



Plus, farmed salmon are dyed pink to impersonate their wild cousins. In 2003, a class-action lawsuit was filed in the state of Washington because the labeling on farmed salmon neglected to mention the artificial coloring. Scientists are concerned because the dyes used in salmon can cause retinal damage.³⁶

Finally, in August 2004, scientists from Indiana University warned that industrial-strength fire retardant is showing up in salmon flesh worldwide.³⁷

The health consequences of exposure to all the toxins found in salmon can be grave—the Environmental Working Group estimates that 800,000 people in the U.S. face an excess lifetime cancer risk from eating farmed salmon.³⁸

Fish: Toxic for Mothers, Poisonous to Babies

Pregnant women who eat fish don't just risk their own health—they also jeopardize the health of their unborn baby.

PCBs, mercury, and other toxins found in fish can be passed on to nursing babies through a mother's breast milk. Researchers from Wayne State University found that "women who regularly ate fish, even many years before becoming pregnant, were more likely to have babies who were sluggish at birth, had small head circumferences, and had developmental problems."³⁹

The EPA estimates that 600,000 children born each year are at risk for a lowered intelligence and learning difficulties due to mercury exposure because their pregnant or nursing mothers ate fish.⁴⁰ Even low levels of mercury in a mother's blood can cause her child to have developmental problems. Mercury poisoning is particularly dangerous to fetuses

because the level of mercury in a fetus's blood is potentially 70 percent higher than in the mother's. This may be because the fetus's blood concentrates mercury with other important molecules that the fetus needs to grow.⁴¹

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Mothers who eat fish during pregnancy may also seriously damage their baby's brain and nervous system. Studies have shown that children born to mothers who ate a lot of fish were slower to talk, walk, and develop fine motor skills and have weaker memories and attention spans.⁴³

"It might reduce IQ by a few points," says Dr. Michael Gochfeld, chair of New Jersey's mercury task force. "It might reduce motor coordination, so that this child is someone we think of as a klutz."⁴⁴

Dr. Roberta F. White, chair of the Department of Environmental Health at Boston University and director of the Boston Environmental Hazards Research Center, says children exposed to mercury before birth do much poorer on tests measuring nerve function.⁴⁵

The brain damage caused by a fish-eating mother is apparently permanent. Scientists at the Harvard School of Public Health have found that mercury contamination of seafood can cause heart damage and irreversible impairment to brain function in children, both in the womb and as they grow. "If something happens in the brain at development, you don't get a second chance," says lead researcher Philippe Grandjean.⁴⁶

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All Fish Are Dangerous

The Public Interest Research Group and the Environmental Working Group (EWG) warn that women who eat more than one can of tuna a month during pregnancy could ingest enough mercury to damage the developing brain of a fetus.⁵⁰

According to the Natural Resources Defense Council, as many as one in six U.S. women of reproductive age might have mercury levels that could put their babies at risk.⁴⁸ The Public Interest Research Group and the Environmental Working Group (EWG) warn that women who eat more than one can of tuna a month during pregnancy could ingest enough mercury to damage the developing brain of a fetus.⁴⁹

Mercury-laden ocean fish aren't the only source of dangerous contamination—fish from our lakes and rivers also threaten the health of expecting mothers and their children. Even the notoriously conservative EPA has determined that more than half of all the freshwater fish it sampled from America's lakes could be unsafe for women of childbearing age to eat twice a week, and more than three-quarters had mercury levels that may be unhealthy for children younger than 3.⁵¹ Massachusetts has warned pregnant women not to eat any freshwater fish caught in the state because of mercury contamination.⁵² As of 2002, 43 states had issued warnings about freshwater fish, restrictions that encompass 30 percent of the nation's lakes and 13 percent of its rivers.⁵³

In response to this growing threat, the Food and Drug Administration and the EPA have both advised women of childbearing age and young children not to eat certain fish that are known to contain alarmingly high levels of mercury.⁵⁴ But all fish contain some mercury, and since mercury is a poison, should any of us needlessly ingest a substance that is known to cause such an array of horrible conditions?

Fish Linked to Breast Cancer and Infertility

Fish consumption has also been linked to decreased fertility and increased rates of breast cancer. Even women who eat small amounts of contaminated fish have a more difficult time becoming pregnant.⁵⁵ Scientists at the University of Wisconsin-Madison found that women who consume freshwater fish suffer from unusually high breast cancer rates.⁵⁶ A similar study conducted by Danish researchers has confirmed the link between fish consumption and increased breast cancer risk.⁵⁷



Sick moms and sick kids: Fish consumption poses serious health risks to women and children, and we all gamble every time we sit down to a meal of fish sticks or flounder. The only way to protect our families and ourselves is to leave fish in the oceans and off our plates.

Food Poisoning: Catch of the Day

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, there are about 75 million cases of foodborne illness every year, including hundreds of thousands of hospitalizations and thousands of deaths. And seafood is the number one cause of food poisoning in the United States.⁵⁸ Symptoms of seafood poisoning include mild to extreme discomfort, nervous system damage, and even death.⁵⁹

Seafood poisoning is caused by eating foods contaminated with viruses or bacteria including salmonella, listeria, and *E. coli*. When *Consumer Reports* looked at bacteria levels in fresh fish bought at supermarkets around the country, they found that between 3 and 8 percent of the samples tested had “unacceptable” levels of *E. coli*, a bacterium that comes from human or animal feces, and that pollutes some waterways.⁶⁰

“[T]he seafood industry has a very poor record of compliance and there is no government testing to monitor pathogens often associated with seafood poisoning. FDA’s seafood-safety system is an industry honor system unworthy of public support.”

—Caroline Smith DeWaal, food safety director for the Center for Science in the Public Interest⁶²

Many people may have had food poisoning without even knowing it, mistakenly attributing it to a case of “stomach flu.” Like the flu, people infected with bacteria from tainted marine animals often suffer from vomiting, diarrhea, and abdominal pain. If left untreated, this food poisoning can lead to death.⁶¹ Children, the elderly, pregnant women and their

unborn children, and people with impaired immune systems are particularly vulnerable. Since fish flesh is a major cause of food poisoning, those who consume fish flesh risk unnecessary illness with every bite they take.

“Seafood is a major cause of food poisoning, sickening more than 100,000 and causing dozens of preventable deaths each year.”

—Caroline Smith DeWaal, food safety director for the Center for Science in the Public Interest⁶³



The FDA: What the Government Doesn’t Tell You Can Hurt You

The FDA doesn’t prevent even the most heavily contaminated fish from being sold, nor does it require warning labels on the fish that even the administration itself admits that pregnant women shouldn’t eat, making it difficult for consumers to know about the dangers.

According to a report by the General Accounting Office (GAO), the seafood industry is woefully underregulated. Seafood processors are only inspected by the FDA once every two years, and many aren’t inspected at all, since they aren’t required to register with the FDA. Only 1 to 3 percent of fish imported from other countries is inspected at the border. Many segments of the industry are completely exempt from regulation, including warehouses and most shipboard processors.⁶⁴

When inspections do occur, they are inadequate, since there is an array of well-known hazards, including (remarkably) mercury contamination, that the FDA does not test fish for.⁶⁵ According to the Center for Science in the Public Interest's Food Safety Director Caroline Smith DeWaal, "[The] FDA's seafood program is riddled with deficiencies, woefully underfunded, and provides no assurance of safety for consumers."⁶⁶

Whose Side Are They on?

Even though the dangers of consuming fish are well known, government agencies continue to place the interests of the fish producers above the health of the public. The Environmental Working Group charges that the FDA changed its mind about advisories limiting tuna consumption after being pressured by the seafood industry.⁶⁷ One leading FDA advisory panel expert resigned in protest after learning that the FDA was going to "disregard" science and not warn consumers about the health risks of eating tuna. A University of Arizona toxicologist, Vas Aposhian, said that the advisory should have put stricter limits on all canned tuna. "The new recommendations are dangerous to 99 percent of pregnant women and their unborn children," he said. "It seems that one should be more concerned about the health of the future children of this country than the albacore tuna industry."⁶⁸

University of Arizona toxicologist Vas Aposhian says the government should put stricter limits on all canned tuna, explaining, "The new recommendations are dangerous to 99 percent of pregnant women and their unborn children."⁶⁹

To learn more, visit FishingHurts.com.

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