

# Got Mercury?



A Project of Turtle Island Restoration Network

## MERCURY IN SEAFOOD FACT SHEET

### **Why do we need to worry about mercury in seafood?**

Fish consumption is the primary source of mercury exposure in the United States<sup>1</sup>. Many people are unaware that certain types of fish may contain unsafe levels of methylmercury. While the U. S. Food and Drug Administration provides an advisory on their website, and by 2004 recognized increased concern for vulnerable populations, the agency is not adequately alerting the public about the potential harm through consumer labeling, nor are they prohibiting fish above the action level of 1ppm to be sold in the marketplace<sup>2</sup>.

Link: <http://www.cfsan.fda.gov/~dms/admehg3.html>

### **Why is mercury in seafood a concern?**

Mercury is a powerful neurotoxin that at elevated levels may lead to cancer, slow growth, brain, and kidney damage. While seafood offers nutritional benefits, consumers, especially women and children need information on mercury levels to determine consumption quantities to balance the health benefits with the health risks. The National Institute of Health estimates that lowered IQ's as a result of mercury exposure is costing the U.S. \$8.7 Billion dollars annually<sup>3</sup>.

### **Who is most at risk from eating seafood containing mercury?**

Children and women of childbearing age are at the greatest risk. Women planning to conceive are advised to avoid certain species entirely for at least a year prior to conception and throughout the duration of their pregnancy. As many as 630,000 or 15 percent of newborns in the U.S. are at risk each year of neurological defects due to mercury contamination, according to the U. S. Environmental Protection Agency.

New studies have also linked mercury ingestion with health problems in men.

See link: <http://www.seaturtles.org/downloads/MyocardialInfactionGuallar.pdf>

### **Where does mercury in seafood come from?**

While 30% of mercury is naturally occurring in the environment, 70% is the result of industrial activities that through U.S. activities alone releases 5,500 tons into the atmosphere each year<sup>4</sup>. Mercury easily becomes airborne, traveling through our global environment and depositing on soil and water. Larger, longer-lived fish eat smaller fish that contain mercury and it magnifies into high concentrations in predatory fish, such as Swordfish, Tuna, King Mackerel, and Tilefish, and continues to accumulate in our bodies causing illness.

### **What is California doing about consumer warnings for mercury in seafood?**

The state of California has laws that require that seafood retailers such as restaurants and supermarkets post warning signs. However, citizen monitoring has found compliance to be lacking<sup>5</sup>, so the Attorney General has taken legal action against restaurants and supermarkets to improve enforcement. California has attempted to require that seafood containing mercury be labeled so that people can make informed choices. However, the seafood industry has sued the state to stop this effort with the support of the U. S. Food and Drug Administration. The lawsuit is pending in the Appeals Court.

**How do I estimate my mercury exposure?** Go to [www.gotmercury.org](http://www.gotmercury.org) or on your cell phone [www.gotmercury.mobi](http://www.gotmercury.mobi)

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<sup>1</sup> The Agency for Toxic Substance Disease Registry cited in Office of Environmental Health Hazards Assessment Report Screening Values for Common Contaminants 2006.

<sup>2</sup> A 2006 survey found that The Center for Science in the Public Interest depicted these shortfalls in their 2006 survey showing that 31 percent of pregnant women, women planning on becoming pregnant and nursing mothers did not know that seafood with high mercury levels could be harmful in 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Public Health and Economic Consequences for Methylmercury Toxicity for the Developing Brain.

<sup>4</sup> Also the Public Health and Economic Consequences for Methylmercury Toxicity for the Developing Brain

<sup>5</sup> See March 2008 report, Mercury in Seafood, No Fair Warning at <http://www.GotMercury.org>