

The Irony of Eating Fish: Healthy Omega-3s or Unhealthy Mercury

By Mary Ellen DiPaola, R.D., CDE, IBCLC



Fish can play a positive role in an individual's diet depending on age and health risks along with quantity and type of fish consumed. Fish and seafood can be an excellent source of omega-3 fatty acids, an important component of heart health, healthy brain development, and in the management of some inflammatory diseases. The American Heart Association (AHA) recommends eating fish at least twice a week to reap the benefits of fish and fish oil to help prevent cardiovascular disease. Fish is also low in saturated fat and is a high-quality source of lean protein and other essential nutrients.

The benefits of including fish as a part of a healthy, balanced diet have come under scrutiny as the reports of elevated mercury levels in some fish have been exposed as a health risk. Mercury occurs naturally in the environment and can also be released into the air through industrial pollution. Mercury falls from the air and accumulates in streams and oceans where, when combined with organic materials, it becomes the harmful form of mercury called methylmercury absorbed by fish as

they feed. Mercury levels increase in fish depending on diet and location. For this reason, the amounts of methylmercury levels vary in each type of fish.

Nearly all fish and shellfish contain traces of methylmercury, and longer living larger fish have the highest levels. When fish high in methylmercury is eaten regularly, overtime mercury accumulates in the human body. Mercury is eliminated naturally through the gastrointestinal system, but it may take over a year for mercury levels to drop significantly. Consuming fish weekly does not significantly increase mercury levels, however eating fish more than once a week can. To counteract increased fish consumption you can reduce the fish in your diet known to have high methylmercury levels for the next week or two to help maintain reasonably balanced mercury level.

Methylmercury affects nerve cells in the brain and spinal cord, especially in unborn babies and young children, higher levels may also produce effects in adults. Methylmercury levels are generally

Advice from the Food and Drug Association (FDA) and Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)

1. Women who are pregnant, planning to become pregnant or nursing, and young children should not eat the highest mercury fish. These fish are swordfish, shark, king mackerel, and tilefish. All others can eat up to 7 ounces of high-mercury fish per week.
2. Minimizing exposure to methylmercury is particularly important for pregnant women, women who are planning to become pregnant, nursing women and young children. This population should limit their consumption of all fish with lower levels of mercury to 12 ounces (2 average meals) per week. Others can eat 14 ounces of week of lesser mercury fish.
3. More information about the levels of methylmercury in various fish can be obtained from the FDA food safety website www.cfsan.fda.gov/~fplsea-mehg.html or the EPA website at www.epa.gov/ostl/fish. To call the FDA use their toll-free number, 1-888-seafood. For information about the safety of fish caught recreationally, check the Fishing Regulations Booklet and contact your local health department about local advisories. A list of state and local health department contacts is available at www.epa.gov/ostl/fish. Levels of mercury vary depending on levels in water where the fish are caught.

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Community Health Resource Center
CALIFORNIA PACIFIC MEDICAL CENTER

"A Resource For Better Health"

CHRC

A Healthy Outlook

Autumn 2006

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A Healthy Outlook

AUTUMN 2006

CHRC Bids Farewell to Executive Director Susan Haikalis

Community Health Resource Center, a program of the Patient Assistance Foundation, was privileged to be under the leadership of Susan W. Haikalis, LCSW, executive director, since January 2003. Ms. Haikalis has been a social work clinician and health care administrator for over 42 years. She has been a social work administrator since 1980 at the University of San Francisco's Mount Zion Medical Center and California Pacific Medical Center where she directed Child Life and Discharge Planning services.

Susan developed a decades long interest in HIV/AIDS when she became the services coordinator at the Mount Zion Medical Center in the earliest days of the epidemic. From 1994 through 2002, she was the Director of Client Services, Treatment Support/Education and Publications at the San Francisco Aids Foundation.

Ms. Haikalis is a recognized leader in health care social work, regularly leading workshops on medical/social work ethics, HIV/AIDS, substance use, and program development and evaluation. She has been a member of the Advisory Committee (and its co-chair for 5 years) of the NASW HIV/AIDS Spectrum Project for Mental Health/Substance Use Training. Since 2000, she served on the Joint



Commission on the Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations' (JCAHO) Public Advisory Group. As we learned at CHRC, she is also a very able administrator.

Ms. Haikalis improved the relationship between California Pacific Medical Center and CHRC developing partnerships with California Pacific's Cardiac Rehabilitation and Radiation Oncology also serving on the Cancer Supportive Services Committee. She has been very involved in assisting in the development of the "Partnership for Healthcare" with the SF Community Clinic Consortium and California Pacific that will provide primary

and specialty care support for San Francisco's uninsured. Ms. Haikalis also developed and taught sessions on Advanced Health Care Directives/End of Life Decisions, Medicare Changes, and other topics of interest to the clients of CHRC. She will be a much-missed leader and member of our team.

Her retirement plans include spending more time with her family, and the community service organizations she enjoys. She and her husband Peter have a long list of travel plans to keep them busy.

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 Kathleen Sheridan – *Food Bank Outreach Program Volunteer*
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Eating Fish continued

highest in older, larger, predatory fish and marine mammals. The fish that pose the greatest risk are swordfish, shark, king mackerel, and tilefish. If over-exposure to methylmercury is suspected, a health care professional should be consulted immediately.

The benefits and risks of eating fish vary depending on a person's stage of life. Children, and pregnant and nursing women may be at higher risk of methylmercury exposure and therefore should avoid eating potentially contaminated fish. For others, the benefits of eating fish far outweigh the risks.

Eating a variety of fish will help minimize any potentially adverse effects due to environmental pollutants. Avoiding excessive intake of high-mercury fish is advised for all adults and older children. Fish and seafood is recommended as a part of a healthy, balanced diet to obtain the health benefits of low saturated fat protein source that can be high in omega-3 fatty acids. For more infor-

We Truly Are a “Community” Health Resource Center

By Heather DiLiso Gordon, R.D.

This spring, I had the opportunity to put the “Community” into practice for the Community Health Resource Center. My seminar for the San Francisco Neighborhood Centers 2nd Biennial Block by Block Conference was a big hit. I was invited to integrate my recommendations at the Telegraph Hill (Tel-Hi) Neighborhood Center child development preschool program.

This involved an intensive 6-week collaboration with the site coordinator; cooking and helping the children of Tel-Hi create an appealing, nutritious, 3-week cycle lunch menu. New menu items were created from “scratch.” These included

turkey Bolognese, chicken nuggets, and, a favorite with kids, ranch dressing. Old stand-bys were revamped to decrease fat and improve nutritional value. Favorites were comfort foods such as macaroni and cheese, and meatloaf. Initially the changes to the menu brought curious questions from the two to five year-olds, as is typical when introducing new foods to kids. However, the second time an entrée was served, they were asking for more. The same was true for the teachers and staff! One of the children's favorite lunch items was homemade baked chicken nuggets with a fruity dipping sauce.



The experience of working in the community at the oldest neighborhood center in San Francisco is just one way the Community Health Resource Center is striving to be “A Resource for Better Health.”

Safety Tips for Selecting and Eating Fish or Shellfish

For childbearing age and nursing women and young children - serve smaller portions of the recommended amounts.

- Do not eat these high mercury fish:
 Shark
 King Mackerel
 Tilefish
 Swordfish
- Eat no more than 12 ounces (2 average servings) a week of a variety of fish and shellfish that are lower in mercury.
 - Five of the most commonly eaten fish that are low in mercury are shrimp, canned light tuna, salmon, pollock, and catfish.
 - Albacore (“white”) tuna has more mercury than canned light tuna. When choosing two meals/week, you may eat up to 6 ounces of albacore/week.
- Check local advisories about the safety of recreational fish caught by friends and family in local lakes, rivers, or coastal area.
 - If no advice is available, eat up to 6 ounces per week of fish caught locally but don't consume any other fish that week.