

^A TALK PAPER

FOOD AND DRUG ADMINISTRATION
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FDA ANNOUNCES ADVISORY ON METHYL MERCURY IN FISH

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is announcing its advice to pregnant women and women of childbearing age who may become pregnant on the hazard of consuming certain kinds of fish that may contain high levels of methyl mercury. The FDA is advising these women not to eat shark, swordfish, king mackerel, and tilefish. As a matter of prudent public health advice, the FDA is also recommending that nursing mothers and young children not eat these fish as well.

Fish such as shark, swordfish, king mackerel, and tilefish contain high levels of a form of mercury called methyl mercury that may harm an unborn baby's developing nervous system. These long-lived, larger fish that feed on smaller fish accumulate the highest levels of methyl mercury and therefore pose the greatest risk to the unborn child. Mercury can occur naturally in the environment and it can be released into the air through industrial pollution and can get into both fresh and salt water.

The FDA advisory acknowledges that seafood can be an important part of a balanced diet for pregnant women and those of childbearing age who may become pregnant. FDA advises these women to select a variety of other kinds of fish -- including

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shellfish, canned fish, smaller ocean fish or farm-raised fish -- and that these women can safely eat 12 ounces per week of cooked fish. A typical serving size of fish is from 3 to 6 ounces.

The FDA's Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition will launch a comprehensive education program to reach pregnant women and women of childbearing age who may become pregnant and their health care providers concerning the hazard posed by methyl mercury to the unborn child. As one of its priorities for fiscal year 2001, the Center will also develop our overall public health strategy for future regulation of methyl mercury in commercial seafood.

Today, EPA is also issuing advice on possible mercury contamination to women and children eating fish caught by family and friends (non-commercial fish). EPA particularly recommends that consumers check with their state or local health department for any additional advice on the safety of fish from nearby waters. Additional information is available on EPA's Web site at: <http://www.epa.gov/ost/fish>.

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