

For Immediate Release

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Scientists Urge FDA and EPA to Strengthen Mercury Fish Advisory

Washington, DC— Thirty academic scientists and consumer advocates wrote to FDA and EPA last Friday, urging them to strengthen the Federal fish consumption advisory and also to do a better job of warning consumers about fish with higher mercury levels. They also recommended that canned ‘light’ tuna stop being listed as a ‘low mercury’ choice.

“Recent research, highlighted in our letter, shows that both beneficial effects of fish nutrients and harm from mercury exposure occur in a baby’s developing brain when a pregnant woman eats ordinary amounts of fish,” said Edward Groth III, PhD, a Mercury Policy Project science consultant, who drafted the letter. “There is no evidence of a threshold for the harmful effects of mercury, and even the amount in a single can of tuna should probably be avoided.”

While prenatal exposure remains the top public-health concern, the letter cites recent evidence that other subpopulations, such as middle-aged men, have elevated mercury exposure more often than women of childbearing age do. Such groups also need advice about how to minimize their mercury exposure, the letter concludes.

The letter also states that while nutritionists encourage all Americans, including women of childbearing age, to eat more fish, such advice must be coupled with the caution to choose low-mercury fish. For example, many states now offer advice to “Eat fish, be smart, choose wisely,” or variations on that theme.

The letter recommends that FDA abandon its 2009 draft quantitative risk/benefit analysis of fish consumption and the methylmercury exposure associated with it, observing that the draft was extensively criticized for pervasive bias, data selection and data omission errors, and other scientific flaws. The letter suggests that a valid quantitative risk-benefit analysis on this topic is beyond the limits of current science, and says abandoning the effort should help restore badly diminished public confidence in the agency’s commitment to rely on sound scientific data and methods.

Finally, the letter recommends that the Federal advisory should better inform consumers about mercury levels in a variety of fish, because which fish a person chooses to eat is the primary determinant of their exposure. The letter points out that because popular seafood choices vary by more than 100-fold in average mercury content, consumers need more specific information about the relative mercury content of the full range of seafood choices, not just the handful mentioned in the current Advisory.

“Mercury contamination of seafood is a widespread public health problem and eating fish shouldn’t be a toxic gamble. The government can and should do more to protect consumers,” said Buffy Martin Tarbox of GotMercury.org.

The letter includes a chart sorting fish into categories by mercury content. Some NGOs also offer “mercury calculators” on the internet, to help consumers make informed choices.

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For more information:

(1) The letter (including list of signers and the mercury fish chart): <http://mercurypolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/fdaepasign-onletterfinaljune2010.pdf>

The Mercury Policy Project (MPP) works to promote policies to eliminate mercury uses, reduce the export and trafficking of mercury, and significantly reduce mercury exposures at the local, national, and international levels. We strive to work harmoniously with other groups and individuals who have similar goals and interests. More information is available on our two websites: www.mercurypolicy.org and www.mercuryfactsandfish.org

“GotMercury.org promotes public health education regarding the risks of mercury in fish and the benefits of healthier seafood choices. GotMercury.org offers a free, on-line mercury in seafood calculator to gauge potential mercury exposure for people who eat fish. For more information please visit: www.gotmercury.org.”