

U.S. Seafood Advice Could Expose Women and Babies to Too Much Mercury, Not Enough Healthy Fats

Contact:

[Monica Amarelo](#)

(202) 939-9140

monica@ewg.org

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WASHINGTON – Pregnant women who follow the federal government's draft dietary advice could eat too much fish high in toxic mercury, which is harmful to the developing brains of fetuses, babies and young children, according [to a new EWG study of women nationwide](#). At the same time, they could fail to get enough of the omega-3 fatty acids essential to their babies' healthy development.

EWG tested hair samples from 254 women in 40 states who eat two or more seafood meals per week, about the same as recommendations under consideration by the Food and Drug Administration and the Environmental Protection Agency. The tests found that nearly 30 percent exceeded the current EPA safety guideline for mercury exposure during pregnancy.

But although the women in the study eat more than twice as much fish as the average American, for almost 60 percent the seafood they ate didn't supply enough omega-3s for an optimal pregnancy. The study shows that during pregnancy women should not only watch how much fish they eat, but what kind of fish.

[Click here to read the full report: U.S. Fish Advice May Expose Babies to Too Much Mercury](#)

“These are savvy, health-conscious women who thought they were making the right choices, so they were shocked to find high levels of mercury in their bodies,” said Sonya Lunder, the study's author and a senior analyst at EWG. “What's more, the fish they ate didn't provide enough omega-3s. The seafood advice from the FDA and EPA should be much more detailed and specific, to help women balance the harm from mercury and the benefits of omega-3s.”

Philippe Grandjean, an adjunct professor of environmental health at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, whose students analyzed the mercury in the hair samples of the EWG study participants, said it's critical to inform pregnant women of the risks of mercury exposure.

“Women who are or plan to become pregnant need a balanced diet that includes fish and seafood to obtain sufficient omega-3 fatty acids, but it should be with minimal mercury contamination,” Grandjean said. “Our research has shown that mercury exposure from eating contaminated fish carries serious health risks, especially for the developing fetal brain, and we should do our best to protect the intelligence of the future by avoiding mercury.”

[Watch Dr. Philippe Grandjean and Kyra Norsigian, a study participant from Boston, Mass., talk about the new study.](#)

“Federal guidelines fall short on protecting women who are pregnant or planning to have children,” said Michael Bender, director of the Mercury Policy Project. “Based on the evidence, it’s time for FDA and EPA to revise their advice, particularly when it comes to reducing tuna consumption, since it’s the largest mercury exposure in the American diet.”

Tessa Hall, a study participant from Richland, Wash., said she was surprised to learn that her mercury level was above the recommended level for nursing mothers.

“I think of myself as a healthy eater,” Hall said. “Most of the protein in my diet comes from seafood and dairy. After seeing the test results, I’m only eating seafood known to be low in mercury.”

The study found elevated mercury exposure for women who ate a lot of sushi, and predatory ocean fish like swordfish, marlin, shark or tuna, which tend to have more mercury because they’re larger and higher on the food chain. To make better choices, [EWG’s Good Seafood Guide](#) and [Seafood Calculator](#) help people select fish and shellfish that are lower in mercury, higher in omega-3 fatty acids and sustainably produced.

Wednesday, March 16, 2016

By Sonya Lunder, MPH, senior analyst

Mercury in Seafood

U.S. Fish Advice May Expose Babies to Too Much Mercury

In 2014, federal agencies issued draft recommendations that women who are pregnant, breastfeeding or might become pregnant and young children eat more fish that is lower in mercury. Their advice is based on the fact that seafood consumption is an excellent source of omega-3 fatty acids and other nutrients.

[EWG felt the advice didn't go far enough](#). It would be ineffective, even dangerous, for women who ate too much mercury or fish species low in omega-3 fatty acids.

Now our concerns have been confirmed by a new study.

We enrolled 254 women who eat at least two meals of seafood, fish or shellfish every week and measured the amount of mercury in their hair to assess how much mercury was in their bodies.

We found that almost 30 percent [of our participants](#) had too much mercury exposure according to Environmental Protection Agency guidelines for pregnant women. Much of their exposure was tied to fish species like tuna steaks and sushi that are not included in the government's warning.

What You Can Do

1. Watch Our Video

EWG's 2-minute video is the best way to hear about the findings and recommendations from our study.

2. Read the report

If the video made you want to learn more, you can read the full report [here](#).

[Read the Report](#)[Download the PDF](#)

3. Educate Yourself



GET YOUR CUSTOM SEAFOOD LIST

Weight in pounds

Your age

Your gender

Do you have heart disease?

EWG provides guidelines for choosing seafood high in omega-3 fatty acids and low in mercury. Here's how to check them out.

- **Calculator:** Use our [calculator](#) to get a custom seafood list – based on your age weight and more.
- **Guidelines:** We also have [general guidelines](#) that fill the gaps of the federal government's flawed guidance.
- **Wallet Card:** You can bring our guidelines with you. [Click here](#) to order a pocket guide to choosing seafood high in omega-3 fatty acids, low in mercury and sustainable.
- **FAQs:** Still have questions about seafood, mercury or omega-3 fats? Check out our [frequently asked questions](#).

4. Tell Your Friends

Let your friends know who would be interested in protecting themselves against too much mercury exposure.

EWG enviroblog

Environmental connections to public health >>

What I Learned by Participating in EWG's Mercury in Seafood Study

By Karen Grote, Guest Blogger

Friday, March 18, 2016

After a year of trying to conceive a child, several months of infertility treatment and finally a miscarriage, I felt completely out of control over my own body. I learned about EWG and began researching what chemicals I was being exposed to and how I could limit my exposure.

One day, as I waded through my friend's food pictures, baby photos and political statements, I came across a post on EWG's Facebook page asking if I ate lots of tuna (yes), sushi (yum) and shellfish (all the time). A few weeks later, I asked my husband to cut a sample of my hair for testing through [EWG's Mercury in Seafood study](#).

When the results came back, I learned something incredibly valuable: eating all that fish had led to a higher mercury level than was recommended by the Environmental Protection Agency, and higher still than recent studies have suggested. [You can read the full report here](#).

It was an eye opener, and more than a little scary. I learned that mercury exposure is most serious for those who are pregnant or trying to become pregnant – precisely what I was trying so hard to do.

Mercury affects brain development, memory and verbal skills in children exposed before birth. It all seemed like a high risk to take just because I liked eating fish.

In my defense, I had always believed seafood – in addition to being delicious – was actually good for me. But here's the truth and the big takeaway for me from this study: *All seafood is not created equal*.

There are plenty of fish in the sea, and when it comes to selecting which to eat, you have to be careful. The good news is that along with mercury, some seafood also contains omega-3 fatty acids, which are really good for you.

The trick is to strike a balance between the two: low mercury, high omega-3s.

Luckily, EWG took all the guesswork out for study participants and provided [a handy chart that categorized seafood in five easy-to-understand categories](#).

The chart was small enough to fold up and carry in my wallet, which is exactly what I did. From then on, if I was deciding between salmon (a "best bet") or tuna (in the "avoid" category), the choice was easy.

But it's not just about the type of seafood I was eating, but also the amount.

According to EWG, the best solution is one or two servings of seafood a week. Before getting my results I never thought twice about ordering seafood while dining out. I started taking note of how much seafood I ate each week, and once I hit the limit, I knew it was time to find something else on the menu.

By participating in the study, I felt so much more informed, and as coworkers and friends saw me consulting the chart at restaurants, they were interested too. Some even made copies or took photos. Turns out I wasn't the only one who didn't really know the truth about seafood.

I still love eating fish. I continue to make it a part of my diet, but my choices are much more informed. I cut out all high-mercury fish (I'll miss you, tuna) and began limiting my consumption of all but the "best bets" and "good choices."

I am so thankful that I parted ways with that little bit of hair to participate in the study. I learned what I needed to know to make myself healthier, both for my own well-being, and for the well-being of the child I learned I was carrying exactly two months after getting my results. Nice timing, EWG.