Study of mercury in fish brings call to strengthen government guidelines

By Morgan Manella, Special to CNN
Updated 3:51 PM ET, Wed March 16, 2016

(CNN) An environmental research organization is urging the federal government to strengthen its proposed advice about what types of fish pregnant women should eat, over concerns about potential exposure to mercury.

The 2014 draft recommendations from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and the Environmental Protection Agency advise women who are pregnant, nursing, or may become pregnant to eat 8 to 12 ounces, or two to three servings, of a variety of low-mercury fish each week. The draft identifies lower mercury fish as salmon, shrimp, pollock, tuna (light canned), tilapia, catfish and cod. It suggests avoiding tilefish, shark, swordfish and king mackerel. The current and draft guidelines advise pregnant women and women who are breast-feeding to limit eating white (albacore) tuna to 6 ounces a week.

But a new study by the nonprofit Environmental Working Group, co-released by the Mercury Policy Project, suggests the guidelines aren't specific enough, and could lead women to eat too much of the wrong kind of fish, especially other forms of tuna.

The EWG tested hair samples from 254 women of childbearing age from 40 states who reported eating as much or slightly more fish than the government recommendations over a period of two months. The study found that 29% of women had more mercury in their bodies than the level the EPA considers safe, 1 part per million.

EWG has advocated for a stricter mercury limit of 0.58 ppm. Almost 60% had more mercury in their system than that stricter limit, according to Dr. Philippe Grandjean, adjunct professor of environmental health at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, who tested and analyzed hair samples for EWG's study. Grandjean said that the limit of 1 ppm was calculated in 2000 and the lower recommendation is based on updated research from 2007.

The study found that mercury levels in women who frequently eat fish are 11 times higher than in women who rarely eat seafood. Although the study participants eat more than twice as much fish as the average American, almost 60% still don't get the amount of omega-3s recommended during pregnancy from seafood in their diets.

"That's really bad," Grandjean said. "It means that people are eating the wrong kind of fish, thinking that they are really eating a healthy and balanced diet, and they're not."

Sonya Lunder, study author and senior analyst at EWG, emphasizes the need for updated federal recommendations.

"I have followed this issue for almost a decade, and I have to say I was very surprised by the number of women who exceeded the EPA guidelines," Lunder said. "I want to make it clear we support the idea that seafood can be a healthy beneficial choice during pregnancy. Omega-3s support healthy development and a healthy baby.

"We want to encourage seafood consumption, but as women begin to eat more seafood, they have to keep that mercury information in front of them and in their mind so they don't go in the wrong direction and suffer from the risks rather than the benefits."

The FDA and EPA are in the process of revising the advice on this issue. The agencies are currently taking public comments about the topic.

Mercury exposure during pregnancy can significantly alter the developing brain and nervous system of the unborn baby and cause lifelong deficits in learning, memory and reaction times, according to the study. There are also issues for women who are not pregnant and men: Mercury can have toxic effects on the nervous, digestive and immune systems, and on lungs, kidneys, skin and eyes, according to the World Health Organization.

Study participants reported eating higher amounts of tuna steaks, tuna sushi and other fish with high levels of mercury. Tuna accounted for about 40% of the mercury consumed by participants. But the FDA and EPA don't identify them as fish pregnant women should avoid.

The four types of fish the FDA recommends pregnant women do not consume -- swordfish, shark, king mackerel and tilefish -- represent 6% of exposure, said Michael Bender, director of Mercury Policy Project and coordinator of Zero Mercury Working Group. But tuna, he noted, is a popular fish in American diets.

"It's really fallen below the radar screen. The FDA unfortunately is tiptoeing around the issue, and this is what the science is showing," Bender said.

Gavin Gibbons, a spokesman for the National Fisheries Institute, disagreed with Bender's assessment.

The FDA guidelines go "species by species and talk about what the upper end limits are that pregnant women could eat," he said, and "hundreds of studies" show women are not being harmed by seafood and might not be eating enough.

"This type of study can scare pregnant women unnecessarily away from a healthy protein that includes essential fatty acids for their baby's brain and eye development," he said.

Registered dietitian Lisa Drayer, who was not involved in the study, agrees the federal government should update recommendations to include a limit on tuna and an increase in wild salmon. She also encourages the consumption of low-mercury, high-omega-3 fish, such as anchovies, herring, trout and sardines.

Wild salmon provides a good dose of omega-3s, which are very important for a growing fetus and play a major role in brain and eye development, earlier studies have shown.

"You can consume a lot of fish but you really want to get the biggest bang for your bite," said Drayer. "My advice is to toss the tuna. Pregnancy is not forever. In the scheme of life, nine months is a small sacrifice to make for a growing fetus."

Study participant Karen Grote understands the significance of specific fish choices firsthand. She found out she was pregnant two months after she received results from the

study indicating her mercury levels were above the recommended level. She said after the study, she changed the way she ate.

"I didn't understand the importance of the types of seafood I was eating," Grote said. "I ate a lot of tuna, and I completely cut that out now. I didn't appreciate at all just how high the mercury would be in tuna."

http://www.cnn.com/2016/03/16/health/mercury-fish-women-study/index.html

Washingon Post

Energy and Environment

Why it's still so hard to eat fish and avoid mercury

By Chelsea Harvey March 18 at 1:33 PM

Salmon sit in ice at the Maine Avenue Fish Market in Washington, DC on Saturday, October 17, 2015. (Photo by Jabin Botsford/The Washington Post)

Women who eat as much seafood as the FDA recommends for people who are pregnant — or who eat slightly more — may be exposing themselves to unsafe levels of mercury depending on the kinds of fish they're eating, says a new study just published by the Environmental Working Group (EWG). The report calls for more detailed federal guidelines on what types of fish are safe, and in what quantities.

But an industry group has already criticized the study. The National Fisheries Institute, a trade organization representing the seafood industry, released a statement Tuesday decrying the report's "fear-mongering," even as other academics supported its basic conclusions.

Mercury contamination in the environment comes from a variety of sources, mainly industrial pollution. Mercury that makes it into water systems and eventually into the ocean can be consumed by small organisms and work its way up the food chain in larger and larger amounts, which is why it tends to exist in the highest levels in large, predatory fish — often the kinds of fish that people like to eat, such as certain species of tuna.

In previous decades, nutritionists have recommended that pregnant women abstain from seafood entirely to avoid exposing their developing babies to harmful mercury. But in the past decade or so, "we've seen the nutritional science shift to say that there are benefits to eating seafood," said the new report's lead author Sonya Lunder, a senior analyst at the EWG, a nonprofit environmental group with a long history of working on the mercury issue.

The most widely touted of these benefits is the prevalence of omega-3 fatty acids, which are considered essential for human health but can't be made naturally by the body. There are three

types of omega-3s, two of which are found mainly in seafood. Research has suggested that consuming these omega-3s during pregnancy can aid in a fetus's development, which is the major reason nutritionists now generally give pregnant women a complex recommendation: consume a moderate amount of seafood, adhering to certain federal guidelines to create a safe level of mercury exposure.

In 2014, the FDA and EPA jointly released a new draft set of guidelines to aid in just that. Overall, for pregnant women and some other groups, the guidelines recommend eating 8 to 12 ounces of a variety of fish each week, and list a number of healthy, low-mercury examples, including salmon, shrimp and light canned tuna, as well as four types of fish to avoid entirely: tilefish from the Gulf of Mexico, shark, swordfish and king mackerel. They also recommend limiting the consumption of albacore tuna to 6 ounces or less per week

But the EWG's report suggests that may not be specific enough. A study of more than 250 women of childbearing age who ate approximately the amount of seafood recommended by the federal guidelines found that around 30 percent of them had higher mercury levels in their bodies than is considered safe by the EPA. On average, the participants were found to have mercury levels 11 times higher than those of a control group of women who ate seafood rarely or not at all (though the control group consisted of only 29 individuals).

The results suggest that study participants may not be choosing the most optimal fish for low mercury and high omega-3 intake. The study estimated, for instance, that tuna accounted for about 40 percent of all the participants' mercury intake — a result that may have been caused in part by the guidelines' incomplete recommendations when it comes to tuna consumption, Lunder pointed out.

The government recommends light canned tuna — which is usually composed of skipjack tuna — as a healthy seafood choice that's low in mercury. However, canned tuna comes in many other varieties, some of which include different species with generally higher mercury concentrations. Canned white tuna, for instance, is usually made from albacore tuna, which can have mercury concentrations several times higher than skipjack.

The importance of differentiating between the different types of canned tuna is not articulated in the guidelines. In fact, Lunder noted, when surveyed many of the study's participants were unsure exactly what type of canned tuna they'd been eating. Additionally, participants reported eating many other forms of tuna, including tuna steaks and tuna sushi, which often are made from species with relatively high mercury contents. None of these are specifically addressed in the guidelines, either.

In general, Lunder said, the EWG continues to support the recommendation that pregnant women consume more seafood. But, she added, "We think that those recommendations need to be paired with much more detailed information about moderate- and high-mercury species that would pose a risk if you eat them."

Other experts agree that better information needs to be included in the guidelines — it just needs to be done carefully.

“I think that the recommendations that this group make are reasonable — the challenge is that there’s a trade-off in providing more information,” said Roxanne Karimi, a research scientist at Stony Brook University who has conducted similar research. “Overall, more information is good so that consumers can make decisions on their own, but it can also be confusing, and there’s a concern that consumers will be discouraged from eating fish altogether, even when there’s an overall benefit.”

Sharon Sagiv, an assistant adjunct professor of epidemiology at the University of California Berkeley, noted that the FDA/EPA guidelines already list some specific recommendations when it comes to which fish to avoid and which fish might be better choices. So one question is whether the participants in the study were unclear about some of these recommendations (for example, the recommendations on tuna) or did not strictly heed them. Lunder pointed out that strict adherence to the types of fish recommended was not a requirement for participation in the study, and indeed some women did report eating fish that the guidelines specifically warn against, such as swordfish.

So the issue is not that the existing recommendations are wrong. Rather, the report urges more specific and detailed instructions to consumers that may make it less likely for women to misunderstand the guidelines.

“FDA and EPA can put out these recommendations, but if they’re at all complicated in terms of their message that’s a problem because it means that women aren’t necessarily getting effective risk communication,” Sagiv said.

Sagiv has conducted research on the effects of prenatal exposure to both mercury and fish consumption. A 2012 study she co-authored found that low-level prenatal mercury exposure was associated with a greater risk for ADHD behaviors in children, but fish consumption during pregnancy can actually protect against these behaviors. “These findings underscore the difficulties of balancing the benefits of fish with the detriments of low-level mercury in developing dietary recommendations in pregnancy,” she and her colleagues wrote in the paper — a conclusion that aligns closely with the EWG’s new report.

The EWG’s study has not been received favorably by all, however. “Published peer-reviewed science that takes into account the befits of omega 3’s and the risks of mercury together…is accepted and understood as the gold standard,” the National Fisheries Institute’s statement says. “Consumers don’t eat fish with a side of mercury, studying it that way only works to further EWG’s agenda when they don’t agree with the avalanche of research that stands in contrast to the narrative they are pushing to the press.”

Aside from the value of revamping the seafood guidelines, Lunder noted that the report highlights the continued need for policies aimed at reducing mercury pollution.

In 2013, the U.S. was one of nearly 150 countries to ratify the Minamata Convention on Mercury, an international treaty aimed at reducing mercury emissions worldwide. The report calls for strong and effective implementation of the treaty. Such steps will be necessary to protect both the environment and human health, Lunden noted.

“Since we’ve polluted nature’s perfect food, we now have to look to changing human habits and patterns in order to protect ourselves from these known toxins,” she said. And Sagiv echoed her sentiments.

“If we didn’t have contaminated seafood, we wouldn’t have to advise women not to eat [certain types of] fish,” Sagiv said. “Unfortunately, we’re in an environment where we do have to worry about that, and that risk communication is really very important.”

Chelsea Harvey is a freelance journalist covering science. She specializes in environmental health and policy.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/energy-environment/wp/2016/03/18/why-its-so-hard-to-eat-fish-and-avoid-mercury/

Are These Kinds of Fish Actually Risky During Pregnancy?

A new study says the FDA's current recommendations are inaccurate.

By Maressa Brown

Mar 18, 2016

On the go-to list of foods to limit when you're pregnant, certain kinds of fish have *always* been red-flagged. Tuna, in particular, is notorious for high levels of the heavy metal mercury, which can be toxic to neurons in the brain. The FDA advises women who might become pregnant, pregnant women, and breastfeeding women to limit albacore (white) tuna to 6 ounces a week, enjoy choices lower in mercury (like shrimp, pollock, salmon, tilapia, catfish, and cod), and to avoid four types of high-mercury fish (tilefish from the Gulf of Mexico, shark, swordfish, and king mackerel) altogether. But a new study by the Environmental Working Group (EWG) — summed up in the above video — has found that even if women eat the species of fish in the amounts recommended by FDA, they may be exposing themselves and their unborn babies to unsafe levels of mercury. Oh, and, they're probably not getting a beneficial dose of omega-3 fats that the FDA cites as a perk of eating fish.

The EWG explains that the list of high-mercury fish is incomplete or inaccurate. For example, canned light tuna is listed as a lower-mercury fish in the most recent recommendations, but the National Resources Defense Council and various other studies categorize it as a high-mercury fish.

In their study, they 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. Almost 30 percent of the participants had too much mercury exposure, and it was tied to types of fish that aren't even on the government's warning, like tuna steaks.

An FDA spokesperson responded by stating that the agency plans to "update our advice" after receiving more than 200 comments submitted by the public on its draft recommendation.

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http://www.cosmopolitan.com/health-fitness/news/a55437/fish-safe-during-pregnancy-fda/

TIME MAGAZINE

Health Diet/Nutrition

Canned Tuna Is Too High In Mercury for Pregnant Women: Health Group

- Alice Park @aliceparkny

March 16, 2016

The latest analysis shows that eating fish the way the government recommends is exposing people, especially pregnant women, to unsafe levels of mercury

Nutrition experts agree that fish is a good source of protein and healthy fats, but these health benefits often come with a down side. Many fish species, from deep-ocean varieties like tuna to river-bound species like carp, also contain high levels of mercury, which the fish absorb from polluted waters. Because studies have shown that mercury, a heavy metal, can be toxic to neurons in the brain, a draft of FDA recommendations advise pregnant women or women expecting to become pregnant to avoid high-mercury fish altogether when they're expecting.

But scientists at the Environmental Working Group (EWG) show that even if women follow the government's advice on which types of fish to eat while they're pregnant, they may be exposing themselves and their unborn babies to unsafe levels of mercury — and not gaining the benefits of the omega-3 fats that they believe they're getting from the fish.

The reason, the EWG charges, is that the list of high-mercury fish is incomplete or inaccurate. Specifically, canned light tuna is listed as a lower-mercury fish, but some studies show it's still high in mercury and it makes the National Resources Defense Council's list of high-mercury seafood. Plus, it contains relatively low amounts of the healthy omega-3 fats, which means its risks may outweigh its benefits.

"It's misleading to name canned light tuna as one of the low-mercury species that women are encouraged to eat," says Sonya Lunder, senior analyst at EWG who wrote the report. It can take months for mercury in the body to get fully eliminated, so doctors should also be advising

women to avoid eating too much of the high-mercury fish for at least six months before they become pregnant.

An FDA spokesperson said in a written response to questions that the agency "will update our advice" after more than 200 comments submitted by the public on its draft recommendation. In a statement, the National Fisheries Institute disagreed with the conclusions in the report, calling it a 'slickly packaged marketing piece designed to drive traffic to its mercury calculator; promotional click bait.'"

EWG asked 254 women of child-bearing age who ate more than the government's recommended amount of fish to record their seafood consumption and submit hair samples for mercury testing. Among women following this preliminary advice of two to three servings of different types of fish a week three out of 10 women sampled were exposed to levels of mercury deemed unhealthy by the EPA.

"There's no reason why the government shouldn't be doing a better job at providing clearer information for women who seek it out," she says. The FDA-EPA guidelines, which aren't final and still in draft form, only mention swordfish, king mackerel, tilefish and shark as species for pregnant women to avoid, and suggest limiting albacore tuna to six ounces per week.

To help women to lower how much mercury they're getting exposed to in their food, she says, "you need a longer list of things to be aware of."

But other government advice gets it right, says Lunder. The recent dietary guidelines for Americans, while controversial for other reasons, advises all adults to eat at least eight ounces of a variety of seafood a week. To avoid mercury exposure, the guidelines provide a list of low mercury seafood, which include salmon, anchovies, herring, shad, sardines, Pacific oysters, and trout. That list should be part of the FDA-EPA advice as well, says EWG scientists, so that women who are pregnant have more complete information about which types of seafood are safer for them while they are expecting — and not just a limited list of what *not* to eat.

As the data on the mercury content of some fish continues to grow, doctors are staring to avoid making blanket recommendations to just eat more fish. Everyone needs to be more aware of balancing the benefits of seafood against its potential risks, and that means considering options, like salmon, that provide the benefits of omega-3s while minimizing exposure to toxins like mercury.

http://time.com/4259955/government-warnings-about-mercury-in-fish-inadequate-report/

Tuna Too High in Mercury, Government Warning Inadequate, Health Group Warns

By Abigail Briones , Christian Post Contributor
March 17, 2016|11:33 pm

REUTERS/THOMAS PETER

A wholesaler checks the quality of frozen tuna displayed at the Tsukiji fish market before the New Years auction in Tokyo January 5, 2015. Recently, health groups warn of risk of high levels of mercury in canned tuna

The Environmental Working Group (EWG) is criticizing the government's draft of recommendations on safe fish consumption, especially by pregnant women, nursing mothers, and women who might become pregnant. The group contends that the varieties of fish listed on the Food and Drug Administration's (FDA) and the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) draft fall short and advise on dietary intake of a certain kind of fish may find pregnant women lacking in omega-3 fats they need.

As a rule, fish represents a good source of dietary protein and fats, but rising concerns on pollution of our waterways have alarmed the government and concerned groups that certain fish may contain high mercury levels toxic to neurons in the brain absorbed from polluted waters. This is especially risky healthwise to groups mentioned, not to mention detrimental to development of fetus in the womb.

The government's draft of recommendations merely says for these groups of women to avoid four high-mercury-containing fish as king mackerel, swordfish, tilefish, and shark; consume no more than six ounces of white or albacore tuna per week, and keep intake of any other fish and shellfish at a maximum of 12 ounces in a week. It goes on to list types of fish which contain lower levels of mercury, namely salmon, canned light tuna, cod, tilapia, and catfish.

The EWG points out that the recommendations do not go far enough, putting the risk groups in more danger of taking in unsafe levels of mercury while not getting the necessary omega-3 fatty acids in fish. Specifically, the group indicates that canned light tuna is listed as a lower-mercury-level fish despite reports that have found in it high levels of mercury. To drive home the point, it mentions that canned light tuna is even on the National Resources Defense Council's (NRDC) list of seafood with high mercury content. With all this, vulnerable groups may have only risked their health with canned light tuna intake without realizing it only contains limited amounts of omega-3 fats.

The group also suggests that the government agencies putting the draft together should update their work with the list of suggestions put forward by the public, including the EWG. Moreover, knowing that mercury takes some time to clear out of the body's systems, the draft should also advise women desiring to get pregnant to avoid eating too much of high-mercury fish for at least six months before getting pregnant.

In contrast, the government-issued dietary guidelines for Americans reflect a specific list of lower mercury level seafood and does not ambiguously suggest to consume "any other fish." The list includes herring, sardines, salmon, Pacific oysters, anchovies, and trout.

Mercury is known to interfere with the brain and nervous system when found in high levels in the body. An unborn baby whose brain is still developing may be born with mental retardation or experience developmental delays growing up.

Parent Herald

Study Of Mercury In Fish Triggers Call To Strengthen Guidelines On What Pregnant Women Should Eat

By Junrell / Mar 17, 2016 08:24 PM EDT

Environmental Working Group (EWG), a nonprofit environmental research organization, is persuading the federal government to be specific about the types of fish that pregnant women should eat. The call was triggered by the concerns about potential exposure to mercury that may hurt the development of unborn babies.

The US Food and Drug Administration has drafted recommendations in 2014, advising women who are pregnant, planning to become pregnant or nursing a baby to consume eight to 12 ounces of low-mercury fish per week. It cited salmon, tuna (light canned), shrimp, tilapia, pollock, cod and catfish as types of fish with lower mercury. The draft has also advised women to refrain from eating tilefish, king mackerel, swordfish and shark.

But a new study conducted by EWG found that the government guidelines on what types of fish pregnant women should eat are not specific enough. CNN reported that the organization is concerned that the vague guidelines may prompt pregnant women to eat more of the wrong fish, such as other forms of tuna.

EWG conducted the study by examining hair samples of pregnant women from different states who admitted that they ate much or slightly more than what was recommended within a two-month period. They discovered that 29 percent of the women possess mercury in their bodies higher than the safe level.

Watch: Pregnant women are not eating enough fish

Study results also showed that women who frequently eat fish have mercury levels that are 11 times higher than women who seldom eat seafood. It was also revealed that despite eating more fish, almost 60 percent of them did not get the amount of omega-3s needed during pregnancy.

Sonya Lunder, study author and senior analyst at EWG, said that there is really a need for the government to update its recommendations. "We want to encourage seafood consumption, but as women begin to eat more seafood, they have to keep that mercury information in front of them and in their mind so they don't go in the wrong direction and suffer from the risks rather than the benefits," she stated.

According to the World Health Organization, mercury exposure during pregnancy can adversely affect an unborn baby's growing brain and nervous system. This could result in lifelong deficits in cognitive thinking, memory, attention, language, and fine motor and visual spatial skills.

http://www.parentherald.com/articles/29602/20160317/study-mercury-fish-triggers-call-strengthen-guidelines-what-pregnant-women.htm

Health

US Diet Advice May Expose Babies to Mercury

Mar 16, 2016 12:01 AM ET // by Paul Heltzel

Diet recommendations under consideration by the U.S. government may lead pregnant mothers to eat unsafe levels of mercury, argues a new report from a consumer watchdog group.

At the same time, pregnant women may not be getting enough omega-3 fatty acids, part of the reason seafood is recommended during pregnancy.

"The study shows that during pregnancy women should not only watch how much fish they eat, but what kind of fish," according to the Environmental Working Group. "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. There is strong evidence that mercury exposure during pregnancy and childhood causes lifelong deficits in learning, memory and reaction times."

Hair samples from 254 women from 40 states were tested. The women ate two or more seafood meals a week, as suggested by recommendations currently under consideration by the Food and Drug Administration and the Environmental Protection Agency, according to the study. Nearly a third of the women tested contained mercury levels the exceed EPA guidelines.

Higher levels of mercury were found in women who consumed swordfish, marlin, shark and tuna steaks and tuna sushi. Lower-mercury species include catfish and tilapia, but the report notes they're also lower in omega-3 fatty acids. Wild salmon, the study notes, is both high in omega-3 and low in mercury exposure. So are anchovies, herring, shad, sardines, Pacific oysters, trout and Atlantic and Pacific mackerel.

"Federal guidelines fall short on protecting women who are pregnant or planning to have children," said Michael Bender, director of the Mercury Policy Project, in a statement released by the EWG. "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."

The National Fisheries Institute disputed the results of the study, saying in a statement: "EWG recommends FDA bring its advice to pregnant women into alignment with the USDA Dietary Guidelines to, 'provide greater clarity.' What they do not mention is that the guidelines have historically said the 'benefits of consuming seafood far outweigh the risks, even for pregnant women.'"

http://news.discovery.com/human/health/us-diet-advice-may-expose-babies-to-mercury-160316.htm

FDA mercury guidelines for pregnant women too loose, report says

An Environmental Working Group report says federal officials should put albacore tuna on the avoid list for pregnant women. *(The Oregonian/File photo)*

By Lynne Terry | The Oregonian/OregonLive
March 16, 2016 at 5:00 AM, updated March 16, 2016 at 5:02 AM

Federal guidelines on fish consumption for pregnant or breastfeeding women don't go far enough to protect them, their fetuses or children from mercury, a new study found.

A report by the Environmental Working Group, an advocacy organization, analyzed mercury levels in just over 250 women in 40 states, including three in Oregon, who eat a lot of fish.

The report found that almost 30 percent had more mercury in their bodies than the level recommended by the Environmental Protection Agency. About 60 percent had more than more conservative levels backed by some researchers.

Mercury is a neurotoxin that can harm the developing brains of fetuses, babies and young children. About 75,000 babies born each year in the United States are exposed in the womb to potentially harmful levels of mercury, the report said.

The women were compared with a small control group that rarely ate fish. Their mercury levels were 11 times lower than the participants, indicating that the high mercury levels came from fish.

The report said the women largely followed federal guidelines that recommend that pregnant or breastfeeding women or those planning to conceive avoid tilefish, shark, swordfish and king mackerel because of high mercury levels. The guidelines recommend that women eat plenty of low mercury species like salmon, shrimp, pollock, tilapia, catfish and cod.

That recommended list includes canned light tuna, which the report said is a mistake.

"It is in fact not low in mercury and is a significant source of mercury in women's diets," the report said.

Charmaine Taylor, a 34-year-old Portlander in the study, used to eat a lot of tuna sushi and sashimi. But then she took part in the study and found out her mercury levels were high.

"I was surprised," Taylor said. "That taught me to eat fish lower on the food chain and to choose salmon over the tuna."

The federal guidelines say women should limit the consumption of albacore tuna to 6 ounces a week. But the report said tuna steaks and sushi also pose a problem.

"Participants reported eating lots of tuna steaks and tuna sushi, as well as other fish with high levels of mercury that FDA and EPA don't mention," the report said. "Several other high mercury species contributed an additional 12 percent of participants' mercury intake."

The FDA responded in a statement to the report, saying its guidelines are only in draft form and that it's received 200 comments. "We've taken comments into consideration," the statement said. "We will update our advice."

The report urged the FDA to include escolar, walleye, opah on the avoid list, along with halibut, snapper, seabass, grouper ono, Spanish mackerel and albacore tuna.

-- Lynne Terry

lterry@oregonian.com

@LynnePDX

http://www.oregonlive.com/health/index.ssf/2016/03/fda_mercury_guidelines_for_pre.html

Federal seafood advice leaves some women full of mercury: Study

Women across the US have elevated mercury levels; a majority of exposure is coming from fish without federal warnings

March 16, 2016

By Brian Bienkowski
Environmental Health News

For years seafood was Karen Grote's "go to" when eating out—ordering tuna, shrimp and lobster.

"I travel a lot for work, so was constantly eating out," said the 34-year old actuary from the Philadelphia area.

But her choices changed after Grote had her hair tested for mercury as part of a study and her levels were elevated. Now pregnant, she still eats some seafood but is limiting how much to avoid harming her unborn child with the neurotoxic chemical.

“It was completely eye opening for me,” Grote said.

After the testing of Grote and other women across the country, an environmental group warns that eating federally recommended seafood amounts may leave women with too much mercury and not enough omega-3s.

The report, released today by the Environmental Working Group, found that the majority of mercury in 254 women of childbearing age from 40 states came from fish the government does not warn pregnant women to avoid, such as tuna steaks and tuna sushi. Only about 17 percent of the women’s mercury load came from species the agencies warn about.

And, though the women sampled ate more seafood than an average U.S. woman, about 60 percent still didn’t have the recommended amount of omega-3s for a pregnant woman.

“If you get a little bit of mercury it can be offset by the omega–3s. But that means you don't get the full benefit of the omega–3s and other nutrients in seafood,” said Dr. Philippe Grandjean, an adjunct professor at the Harvard School of Public Health, in a statement.

Medical professionals and officials have long struggled with balancing seafood recommendations for women who are, or might get pregnant. Fish are the major source of people’s exposure to mercury, which can harm developing brains and reduce IQs.

But research has also shown that eating fish provides vital nutrients, omega-3 fatty acids and protein, for fetal brain growth, and that children's IQs increased when their mothers had eaten low-mercury fish.

The report comes a year and a half after the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and Food and Drug Administration made major changes to their seafood consumption advice: recommending consumption of at least 8 ounces of low-mercury fish per week.

The changes marked the first time the EPA and FDA recommended a minimum amount of fish that pregnant women and children should eat.

Michael Bender, executive director of the Mercury Policy Project, said the agencies’ changes to seafood advice fall “way short” in protecting fish eaters.

“We’re always hearing from federal agencies how we should follow the latest science, this advisory was the complete opposite,” said Bender, whose organization partnered with the Environmental Working Group on the recent study.

Sonya Lunder, a senior analyst at the Environmental Working Group, led the study and said the main point is dietary guidance needs to be more specific. “The FDA for a long time said too

many details could be overwhelming," she said. "We're in the information age … there are really savvy, informed consumers out there."

Tuna seems to be a problem. Lunder pointed out that in their study about 40 percent of the mercury was coming from eating various forms of it—canned tuna, tuna steaks, tuna sushi.

"The FDA for a long time said too many details could be overwhelming. We're in the information age … there are really savvy, informed consumers out there."-*Sonya Lunder, Environmental Working Group*

The FDA warns pregnant or breastfeeding women to eat no more than 6 ounces of albacore tuna a week, but does not warn about other types of tuna.

The advisory "fails to recognize tuna steaks, tuna sushi, and also light canned tuna … this is clearly not a low mercury fish," Bender said. Lunder added that tuna warnings are especially important, as it's a common fish that some people eat daily.

Lauren Sucher, a spokesperson at the FDA, wouldn't comment on the new study but said the agency is revising the 2014 draft advice, adding that they've received more than 200 public comments.

The study confirmed that seafood is the major route of mercury exposure for people: Mercury levels were 11 times higher in those who frequently ate fish compared to those who rarely ate it.

Perhaps most concerning: about 29 percent of the women (all of childbearing age) had mercury levels above 1 part per million, which is what the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency considers safe.

Bender called the 1 part per million level, "clearly outdated and very weak." Many health researchers, including Grandjean, say that 1 part per million is too high, and that about .58 parts per million is a more protective upper limit for pregnant women. Sixty-percent of those sampled exceeded that limit.

Grote said she's still eating some seafood, but has completely cut out tuna. She's trying to include more low mercury options, such as salmon. The new Dietary Guidelines released earlier this year by the U.S. Departments of Health and Human Services and of Agriculture list salmon, anchovies, herring, shad, sardines, Pacific oysters and trout as fish high in omega-3s and low in mercury.

"I was a bit ignorant to the risks of mercury," Grote said. "I always viewed seafood as healthy."

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For questions or feedback about this piece, contact Brian Bienkowski at bbienkowski@ehn.org.

http://www.environmentalhealthnews.org/ehs/news/2016/march/women-mercury-pregnant-fish-warnings-fda

Canned Tuna Too High in Mercury, Government Warning Inadequate, Health Group Warns

Recently, health groups warn of risk of high levels of mercury in canned tuna

The Environmental Working Group (EWG) is criticizing the government's draft of recommendations on safe fish consumption, especially by pregnant women, nursing mothers, and women who might become pregnant. The group contends that the varieties of fish listed on the Food and Drug Administration's (FDA) and the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) draft fall short and advise on dietary intake of a certain kind of fish may find pregnant women lacking in omega-3 fats they need.

As a rule, fish represents a good source of dietary protein and fats, but rising concerns on pollution of our waterways have alarmed the government and concerned groups that certain fish may contain high mercury levels toxic to neurons in the brain absorbed from polluted waters. This is especially risky healthwise to groups mentioned, not to mention detrimental to development of fetus in the womb.

The government's draft of recommendations merely says for these groups of women to avoid four high-mercury-containing fish as king mackerel, swordfish, tilefish, and shark; consume no more than six ounces of white or albacore tuna per week, and keep intake of any other fish and shellfish at a maximum of 12 ounces in a week. It goes on to list types of fish which contain lower levels of mercury, namely salmon, canned light tuna, cod, tilapia, and catfish.

The EWG points out that the recommendations do not go far enough, putting the risk groups in more danger of taking in unsafe levels of mercury while not getting the necessary omega-3 fatty acids in fish. Specifically, the group indicates that canned light tuna is listed as a lower-mercury-level fish despite reports that have found in it high levels of mercury. To drive home the point, it mentions that canned light tuna is even on the National Resources Defense Council's (NRDC) list of seafood with high mercury content. With all this, vulnerable groups may have only risked their health with canned light tuna intake without realizing it only contains limited amounts of omega-3 fats.

The group also suggests that the government agencies putting the draft together should update their work with the list of suggestions put forward by the public, including the EWG. Moreover, knowing that mercury takes some time to clear out of the body's systems, the draft should also advise women desiring to get pregnant to avoid eating too much of high-mercury fish for at least six months before getting pregnant.

In contrast, the government-issued dietary guidelines for Americans reflect a specific list of lower mercury level seafood and does not ambiguously suggest to consume "any other fish." The list includes herring, sardines, salmon, Pacific oysters, anchovies, and trout.

Mercury is known to interfere with the brain and nervous system when found in high levels in the body. An unborn baby whose brain is still developing may be born with mental retardation or experience developmental delays growing up.

http://www.christianpost.com/news/canned-tuna-too-high-in-mercury-government-warning-inadequate-health-group-warns-159369/#U2XbMZpLyyJ6wJHK.99

Are You Consuming Dangerous Amounts Of Mercury?

By Amy Westervelt • Mar 17, 2016

Pregnant women following federal guidelines around eating seafood may be consuming toxic levels of mercury.

Pregnant women following the government's guidelines on seafood may be consuming toxic levels of mercury.

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1:12

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The FDA and EPA advise pregnant women to consume more seafood in order to get extra doses of omega-3 fatty acids, which are essential to a baby's development. But a report out today from the nonprofit Environmental Working Group finds that pregnant women following that advice may also be ingesting toxic levels of mercury. Report author Sonya Lunder explains.

"Forty percent of the mercury in our study participants came from tuna - including canned albacore and light tuna, but also tuna steaks and tuna sushi, but the FDA only tells women to limit their intake of canned tuna, it doesn't mention any of the other types."

Does that mean pregnant women should just steer clear of seafood altogether? Lunder says no.

"Other elements of seafood have the opposite effect of mercury and boost baby's brain development."

EWG based its findings on a survey of 254 women across 40 states, including California and Nevada. Lunder says federal guidelines need to do a better job of calling out high mercury options like tuna, and encouraging consumption of low-mercury, high-omega3 options like wild salmon, rainbow trout, and Atlantic mackerel.

http://kunr.org/post/are-you-consuming-dangerous-amounts-mercury#stream/0

MOTHER JONES
Environment

The One Thing No One Tells Women About Seafood

A new report has some bad news for fish lovers.

—By Julia Lurie

| Thu Mar. 17, 2016 6:00 AM EDT

Pregnant? Time to ditch that tuna.

According to a new report from the Environmental Working Group, pregnant women who eat the amount of fish suggested by federal guidelines routinely have unsafe levels of mercury in their blood.

The Food and Drug Administration recommends that expecting mothers eat two to three servings of fish per week, with an emphasis on those high in omega-3 fatty acids and low in mercury, a neurotoxin that can put a developing fetus at risk. But the EWG, which tested mercury levels in 254 pregnant women following the recommendations, found that 1 in 3 participants had mercury levels deemed unsafe by the Environmental Protection Agency.

"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 author Sonya Lunder in a statement. "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."

Federal guidelines don't specify exactly how much mercury in fish is too much, but generally speaking, the mercury-heavy fish tend to be at the top of the food chain—think tuna, swordfish, and marlin. They ingest the heavy metal when feeding on smaller contaminated fish, which, in turn, absorb it from water polluted by coal-fired power plants or other industrial sources.

For seafood lovers trying to avoid heavy metal, there are plenty of options low in mercury and high in omega-3 fatty acids:

http://www.motherjones.com/environment/2016/03/report-pregnant-women-mercury-seafood

Seafood recommendations can pose mercury risk to pregnant women

By Victoria Colliver

Updated 5:15 pm, Wednesday, March 16, 2016

Women who follow the federal government's draft recommendations for the amount of fish they should eat may end up exceeding environmental guidelines for mercury exposure during pregnancy, a new study has found.

The study, released Wednesday by the Environmental Working Group, found that 30 percent of frequent seafood eaters were found to have exceeded mercury limits established by the Environmental Protection Agency. They had 11 times as much mercury in their system on average as those who rarely ate seafood.

"We believe the nutrition-based advice for people to eat more seafood is backed up by science. But the science shows that (fish) only provides a benefit when you can keep your mercury levels low," said Sonya Lunder, the study's author and a senior analyst at the Washington nonprofit research group that also has offices in Oakland.

The federal government's draft guidelines were released in 2014. They recommended that to support fetal growth and development, pregnant women eat two or more servings of seafood a week, or at least 8 to 12 ounces a week of fish lower in mercury. That's about twice as much as the average American consumes.

Fish is considered a key source of omega-3 fatty acids, which are essential to babies' development and are also thought to provide a wide range of health benefits, including a lower risk of coronary heart disease and improved cholesterol levels.

But fish is also considered the primary dietary source of mercury, which is known to be especially harmful to the developing brain and fetal nervous system, and is linked to learning and memory problems later in life. Coal-fired power plants are considered the single-largest source of toxic mercury contamination in the U.S.

Limit canned albacore

The federal government recommends women who are pregnant limit their consumption of canned albacore tuna and avoid swordfish, shark, tilefish and king mackerel, which have particularly high mercury levels. The EPA has said women who are pregnant, nursing or considering pregnancy should have a mercury concentration of less than 1 part per million, the equivalent of about one drop of water in 13 gallons.

The Environmental Working Group tested the mercury levels of 254 women of child-bearing age in 40 states, including California, who ate as much or slightly more fish than the FDA recommendations.

Hair-sample tests

The participants' mercury levels, which were tested through hair samples, ranged from well below the EPA guidelines to 8.8 parts per million, or nearly nine times the limit. Almost 30 percent of the participants exceeded the EPA levels.

The study also found that in almost 60 percent of the women, the seafood they ate didn't supply enough omega-3s for an optimal pregnancy. The study authors said the results suggested that women aren't being given proper information about what kinds of fish are safe to eat.

But it's even tough for consumers who know what to do to keep mercury levels low.

Study participant Helen Wong, 30, of Oakland buys a 3-pound bag of wild sockeye salmon each month, which amounts to about two servings a week. She chose that fish because it's known to be low in mercury.

"If the science already tells us a substance is hazardous," Wong said, "I want to minimize that as much as possible."

'No way to win'

But her mercury levels — while still below the EPA limits at 0.7 parts per million — were higher than she expected. "It seems like there's no way to win," she said. Still, Wong has maintained her salmon-eating habits for the benefit of the omega-3s.

Ashley McCormack, 28, of San Francisco was equally surprised to find that her levels, at 1.2 parts per million, exceeded the EPA's guidelines.

"This is kind of a wake-up call," said McCormack, who works in marketing and fundraising for the Environmental Working Group in Oakland, but wanted to participate in the study to learn about her mercury levels. She said she didn't think her fish consumption would put her at risk, but now avoids tuna, both canned and in sushi.

The National Fisheries Institute, a seafood industry trade group, didn't take the environmental group's self-published study seriously. A spokesman for the group called the report "woefully out of step with the latest science" and said it is likely to do more harm than good.

Meanwhile, the federal government is considering revising its draft recommendations after receiving more than 200 public comments and holding an advisory committee meeting. They could not say when the final recommendations would be published.

Victoria Colliver is a San Francisco Chronicle staff writer. Email: vcolliver@sfchronicle.com Twitter: @vcolliver

Mercury risks

in seafood

For the Environmental Working Group's report: http://bit.ly/1UtUZMF

The group's seafood guide can be found at: http://bit.ly/1uFhiB9

For the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's draft advice, which identifies fish that have higher mercury levels: http://1.usa.gov/1QVXS7M

If you follow US diet guidelines on seafood, you might have high mercury levels

Alison Feller, March 16, 2016

There are plenty of fish in the sea, and we've long been told to go ahead and dig in for a hefty dose of omega-3s. But could you be eating too much fish—and are you eating the right kinds?

A just-released study from the Environmental Working Group (EWG) reveals that women who ate the government-recommended amount of seafood had 11 times higher mercury levels than those who rarely ate seafood.

The study tested 254 women of childbearing age who reported eating as much or slightly more fish than the government recommends for pregnant women (8 to 12 ounces per week). Nearly three in 10 women were found to have more mercury in their bodies than the Environmental Protection Agency says is safe—and a level many experts say is far too high for pregnant women.

And although the women in the study ate more fish than the average American, nearly 60 percent still didn't get the amount of omega-3s recommended during pregnancy from seafood in their diets, the study found.

"The advice from the [Food and Drug Administration] and [Environmental Protection Agency] should be more detailed and specific,"says Sonya Lunder, the study's author and a senior analyst at EWG. "Women think they're eating a healthy diet because they're consuming a lot of fish, which is low in saturated fat and has lots of healthy minerals. But they don't realize they're at risk for high levels of mercury, too."

The key, EWG reports, is not just watching how much fish you eat, but also the kinds of fish you consume.

EWG advises avoiding king mackerel, marlin, orange roughy, shark, swordfish, and tilefish, and limiting consumption of tuna in all forms.

Best bets? According to the EWG, it's wild salmon, sardines, farmed rainbow trout, mackerel, oysters, mussels, and herring. "These fishier varieties are higher in fat and lower on the food chain, but they accumulate less mercury," says Lunder.

Fish selection is also crucial when it comes to getting maximum omega-3s. "You can eat 20 servings of shrimp or just a serving and a half of salmon and get the same benefits," Lunder says.

While the mercury-related concern is more imminent for women who are currently pregnant, all women should take EWG's suggestions into consideration, particularly if they're thinking about getting pregnant in the next year or so, Lunder says. "It takes a little while to make these dietary changes and to see the mercury levels drop," she says. "It's worth keeping an eye on high-mercury fish consumption for up to a year before getting pregnant."

Wondering how your pescatarian-like habits stack up? EWG's Good Seafood Guide and Seafood Calculator tools can help you find fish that's high in omega-3 fatty acids and low in mercury.

http://www.wellandgood.com/good-food/new-study-high-mercury-levels-fish/