



Consumer Protection fact sheet:

Mercury in Fish

1. What is mercury?

It is a heavy silver-like metal that is liquid at ordinary temperatures and used especially in scientific instruments such as glass stem thermometers. Quicksilver is another name for mercury.

2. How does mercury harm people?

Mercury retards brain development of the unborn baby and small children, delays physical development produces abnormal muscle tone and affects coordination, among other effects.

3. How does mercury get into fish?

Mercury occurs naturally in the environment and it can also be released into the air through industrial pollution. When it collects in streams and oceans, bacteria in the water changes the mercury into methylmercury - a poisonous form. Fish absorb some of it in the water, and they accumulate it in their body meat as they feed on smaller fish, aquatic plants and organisms.

4. Can thorough cooking of fish destroy the methylmercury or render it harmless?

Cooking does not destroy or denature this toxic substance; no one method of cooking is more effective in lowering methylmercury levels. However, preparation of fish to remove the fatty parts and cooking fish in ways that allow the fat to drain away can reduce your exposure to accumulated mercury. See "[Guide to health eating of the fish you catch](http://www.epa.gov/waterscience/fish/30cwafish.pdf)" (<http://www.epa.gov/waterscience/fish/30cwafish.pdf>) for more information.

5. Who needs to be concerned?

While methylmercury may cause toxic effects in all people, pregnant and nursing women, newborns and young children are most at risk of developing harmful effects.

6. I like eating fish for its nutritional values; what can I do to protect my unborn child from the effects of methylmercury in fish?

Avoid eating larger fish such as Shark, Swordfish, King mackerel and Tilefish. They normally accumulate the highest levels of methylmercury and pose the greatest risk to people who eat them regularly. Do select a variety of other (small) kinds of fish and enjoy eating them as part of a healthful diet. Beware of eating canned large fish, such as Tuna. If you eat fish caught locally by family or friends, you need to be aware of any advisories in effect for the areas where the fish were caught.

7. How much fish should I eat and still be safe?

The Food & Drug Administration recommends that you eat 12 ounces or less of fish each week. Pregnant and nursing women and women who may become pregnant may need to eat less than this amount.