

The Sensible Environmentalist

Health Benefits of Fish Outweigh Risks

DEAR DR. MOORE:
How can fish containing mercury be good for you?

This is what I worry about: that mercury in fish is causing greater alarm than necessary and people are eating less fish as a result. That would be a disaster.

Aside from being low in saturated fat and high in protein, many species



Dr. Moore

of fish contain Omega 3 fatty acids, which (among other things) protect against heart disease and Alzheimer's, and reduce the risk of certain types of cancer. One recent study in Chicago found that seniors who ate fish twice a week had a 13% slower rate of mental decline than those who ate none.

For most of us, the amount of mercury in fish is too low to be an issue. The risk is somewhat greater for pregnant women, nursing mothers and young children—but, while smaller amounts can potentially cause harm, it's still important to eat fish.

Another recent study, this one at Harvard Medical School, found that babies of women who ate fish during pregnancy scored higher in terms of mental development. The exceptions were those with high levels of mercury, who scored lower. The researchers expressed concern that pregnant women are being advised to reduce their fish intake—and that this will have the “unintended consequence of depriving fetuses of essential nutrients.”

For those at risk, the answer is to choose fish that's high in Omega 3 fatty acids and low in mercury such as salmon, canned light tuna and sardines. Species with low levels of mercury (but less Omega 3) include cod, haddock and whitefish, while shark and swordfish have high levels of mercury and should be avoided.

The good news is that human-caused emissions of mercury have dropped more than 45% since 1990. Government regulations now limit the amount of mercury used in batteries and paint, and require increased pollution controls for municipal waste combustion and medical waste incineration. The next step, which began in March 2005, is to reduce emissions from coal-fired electric power plants.

Mercury is a naturally occurring element found in the earth's crust, including many rocks and coal. When coal is burned, the mercury is released and eventually settles into soil or water, where it builds up in fish and shellfish. Fortunately, there's a tremendous push in our society to use less coal and other fossil fuels because they're thought to be a cause of global warming.

It makes sense to be concerned about mercury in our environment and to reduce human-caused emissions. But it makes just as much sense to continue eating fish.

Dr. Patrick Moore has been a leader of the environmental movement for more than 30 years. A co-founder of Greenpeace, he holds a PhD in ecology and a BSc in forest biology. Questions can be sent to Patrick@SensibleEnvironmental.com