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## Fact Sheet

JOINT DEPARTMENTAL RELEASE

### **Fact Sheet: Fish consumption guidelines for Alaskans**

*A guide to eating fish for all Alaskans*

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: Oct. 15, 2007

#### **General information:**

- The Alaska Department of Health and Social Services has weighed the benefits of eating fish against the potential risks from contaminants to develop new guidelines for consuming fish caught in Alaska waters.
- Fish consumption guidelines are not unique to Alaska; nearly all states have health advice for eating fish from local waters. Alaska's new recommendations are easy to follow, and the suggested consumption limits do not apply to all residents.

#### **The benefits:**

- Fish is a healthy part of a balanced diet for everyone, including pregnant women and children.
- Fish is an excellent source of protein, omega-3 fatty acids and antioxidants that can promote heart health and a child's growth and development. A recent study showed that eating seafood regularly, especially those higher in omega-3s, reduces risk of death from coronary heart disease by as much as 36 percent.
- Fish eaten by a pregnant woman can improve the brain development in her unborn child.

#### **The risks:**

- Almost all fish contain some amount of mercury, a toxic metal that enters the environment naturally and through industry. Some fish species tend to have more mercury than others, especially those that are long-lived and eat other fish.
- Too much exposure to mercury can harm the developing nervous system of unborn babies and growing children. State health officials are actively monitoring Alaska residents and have not found any cases of unsafe mercury levels in Alaskans who have eaten fish from local waters.

#### **Your best bets:**

- Choose fish high in omega-3 fatty acids and low in mercury, like wild Alaska salmon, black cod (sablefish), herring, sardines and canned chunk light tuna.
- Eat a variety of fish and other seafood.

# Alaska Fish Consumption Guidelines

## **Adult men, teenage boys, and adult women who cannot become pregnant:**

To get the maximum health benefits from eating fish, eat at least two fish meals a week.

- There are no suggested consumption limits for any species of Alaska fish. This group can eat as much fish caught from Alaska waters as they want.

## **Women who are or can become pregnant, nursing mothers and teen-age girls:**

To get the maximum health benefits from eating fish, eat at least two fish meals a week **while following these guidelines** to limit the amount of mercury exposure to unborn and nursing babies.

- There are no limits to the consumption of the following fish from Alaska waters:
  - **Pacific cod**
  - **Walleye pollock**
  - **Black rockfish**
  - **Pacific ocean perch**
  - **Any species of wild Alaska salmon**
  - **Halibut under 20 pounds**
  - **Lingcod under 30 inches long\***
- Limit your consumption of the following fish from Alaska waters, found to have **low** mercury levels, to no more than **four** meals per week\*\*:
  - **Black cod (also known as sablefish)**
  - **Rougeye rockfish**
  - **Halibut between 20 and 40 pounds**
  - **Any halibut purchased from stores or restaurants\*\*\***
  - **Lingcod between 30 and 40 inches long\***
- Limit your consumption of the following fish from Alaska waters, found to have **moderate** mercury levels, to no more than **three** meals per week\*\*:
  - **Halibut between 40 and 50 pounds**
- Limit your consumption of the following fish from Alaska waters, found to have **moderately high** mercury levels, to no more than **two** meals per week \*\*:
  - **Yelloweye rockfish**
  - **Large halibut between 50 and 90 pounds**
  - **Lingcod between 40 and 45 inches long\***
- Limit your consumption of the following fish from Alaska waters, found to have **higher** mercury levels, to no more than **one** meal per week \*\* (A second fish meal for the week is recommended from species found to be lower in mercury.)
  - **Salmon shark**
  - **Spiny dogfish**
  - **Very large halibut over 90 pounds**
  - **Lingcod over 45 inches long\***
- Avoid certain fish caught outside Alaska, specifically **shark, tilefish, swordfish, and king mackerel**. These large fish species usually contain the highest amounts of mercury.

\*There are different catch size limits for lingcod, depending on fishing location. Consult the Alaska Department of Fish and Game's sport fishing regulations for location-specific information.

\*\* Average meal size of 6 ounces uncooked weight.

\*\*\*Alaska's commercially caught halibut weigh an average of about 33 pounds each. Therefore, halibut fillets bought in stores or restaurants are safe for women who are or can become pregnant, nursing mothers and children age 12 or younger to eat as often as four times a week. Everyone else can enjoy commercially caught halibut as often as they want.

### **Children age 12 or younger**

The same advice for women who are or can become pregnant applies to children age 12 or younger; however, a child's meal size is considered to be **3 ounces** or less (uncooked weight).

### **Additional Fish Advice**

- People who are concerned about the mercury levels in fish can reduce their exposure by eating fish lower in mercury, such as any type of wild Alaska salmon. People can eat as much wild Alaska salmon as they want.
- Women and children who follow the guidelines may mix and match between species and sizes as long as they don't go beyond the total recommended amount per week, on average. For example, if someone has two meals of yelloweye rockfish or a single serving of spiny dogfish in a week, he or she should wait until the next week to eat more fish from any other restricted category. More meals from the unrestricted category may always be added without significantly impacting a person's mercury intake for the week.
- Six ounces of uncooked fillet is about the size of two decks of cards.
- **Tuna** is not caught in Alaska waters, but is often a staple in people's diets. Fresh or frozen tuna fillets and canned albacore tuna can have elevated levels of mercury. Alaska health officials recommend that women who eat tuna choose canned or pouched chunk light tuna packed in water. This type of tuna typically has less mercury than fillets or canned albacore.
- People who catch and eat large amounts of fish (over four meals a week) and would like additional guidance are encouraged to contact the Section of Epidemiology at (907) 269-8000.
- The full report, *Fish Consumption Advice for Alaskans: a Risk Management Strategy to Optimize the Public's Health*, can be viewed online at <http://www.epi.hss.state.ak.us>.

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