



## FOOD SAFETY ACROSS THE LIFE CYCLE

### MERCURY



#### What is Mercury?

Mercury is an element that occurs naturally in nature. It is also released as pollution in the air from industries. This mercury then builds up in streams and oceans. Bacteria in the water change mercury into a more toxic form called methylmercury. Mercury can build up in the bodies of animals and people. When this happens, it is called mercury poisoning.



#### What is Mercury Poisoning?

Fish and shellfish in the streams and oceans absorb methylmercury. Over time, mercury levels build up in fish. This is the main way that people get mercury into their bodies. As people eat fish that contain mercury, the mercury then builds up in their bodies. The people who should be most worried about mercury in fish are: pregnant women, women who might become pregnant, breastfeeding mothers and young children (under the age of 5).



#### What are the symptoms of mercury poisoning?

The symptoms are different for small children and adults. For small children, the symptoms include:

- small decreases in learning abilities,
- delays in walking and talking,
- decreases in attention or memory.

The symptoms in adults are:

- numbness in hands and feet,
- headaches,
- loss of concentration, coordination or memory,
- blurred vision,
- hair loss,
- nausea,
- tremors.

## How do I get mercury poisoning?

Mercury poisoning can occur when a person routinely eats certain types of fish that contain high levels of the toxic mercury. These types of fish should be avoided by breastfeeding women, pregnant women, women who might become pregnant and young children.

The fish to be avoided are:

- Swordfish
- Tilefish
- King mackerel
- Shark



The body removes methylmercury naturally but it may take up to a year for this level to drop to a safe level. This is why women who may become pregnant should not eat the above fish.

## What fish are safe to eat?

Fish and shellfish provide high quality protein and are an important part of the diet. The following guidelines will help you decrease your levels of mercury in your body.

1. Do not eat shark, swordfish, tilefish or King mackerel.
2. Eat a variety of fish and shellfish with up to two, 6 ounce servings for adults or two, 3 ounce servings for children per week. The most commonly eaten fish that are low in mercury are:
  - shrimp,
  - canned light tuna,
  - salmon,
  - pollock,
  - catfish.
3. White tuna (albacore) is a commonly eaten tuna. This variety of tuna contains more mercury than canned light tuna. One 6 ounce serving of albacore tuna is safe to be eaten each week as a part of the total 12 ounces per week.



For additional information contact:

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention—[www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)
- USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service—[www.fsis.usda.gov](http://www.fsis.usda.gov)
- U.S. Food and Drug Administration—Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition—[www.cfsan.fda.gov](http://www.cfsan.fda.gov)
- [www.FoodSafety.gov](http://www.FoodSafety.gov)
- 1-800-SAFEFOOD
- Partnership for Food Safety Education—[www.fightbac.org](http://www.fightbac.org)
- Your physician
- Your local public health department
- KY Food Safety Branch - (502) 564-7181 or [http//chfs.ky.gov/dph/info/phps/](http://chfs.ky.gov/dph/info/phps/)



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