

Studies show little risk in eating Alaska fish

by Dr. Joe Klejka, YKHC Medical Director

YKHC grew concerned about a recent advisory published by a lower 48 environmental group which recommended that pregnant women and nursing mothers not eat certain kinds of fish that may contain unsafe levels of methyl mercury. This recommendation was made because animal studies link high levels of methyl mercury with fetal development problems.

Partially due to these concerns, there are new, lower, EPA and FDA guidelines for safe methyl mercury levels in food. These recommended levels are much lower than mercury levels that have been known to cause disease in humans. The levels found in most subsistence fish caught in Alaska are much lower than these recommendations.

Salmon from the YK Delta have consistently had some of the lowest levels of methyl mercury found in fish from around the country. Our salmon are an extremely beneficial dietary component. YKHC's Lushfish study, done in the late 90s, found methyl mercury levels in burbot and pike to be generally lower than the EPA/FDA recommended intake. Two pike in the "lushfish" study on the YK Delta did have levels of methyl mercury in a higher range. These levels were found only in the largest and oldest pike that had more time to accumulate methyl mercury from the foods these pike were eating. These levels pose little risk. However, for those pregnant women and nursing mothers who wish to eat pike with the lowest levels, we would recommend eating smaller, younger pike.

A considerable amount of research has already been done, for sea mammals, many species of fish, whales, etc. It shows that the EPA recommendations for quantities of fish people should eat are unwarranted for Alaska. What may hold true in certain other parts of the country where there is a lot of industrial pollution is not

applicable to Alaska. The FDA has acknowledged that their guidelines might not apply in certain areas or for certain kinds of fish.

The Alaska Division of Public Health Section of Epidemiology sponsored a major study a few years ago assessing the benefits vs the risks of subsistence foods and found that in terms of nutrition and general health that the benefits of a Native subsistence diet far outweigh any risks from possible contaminants (specifically methyl mercury).

YKHC believes that halibut from the Y-K Delta is very safe to eat. However, halibut is now coming under suspicion of containing unsafe levels of methyl mercury. Since halibut is a staple of coastal subsistence diet as well as an economic resource, YKHC is proposing a study of halibut caught in western Alaska coast waters to determine levels of methyl mercury. This is being done for the benefit and continued safety of pregnant women and nursing mothers in the Y-K Delta. In this project, YKHC is enlisting the aid and cooperation of Alaska Dept. of Environmental Conservation, Alaska Native Health Board, University of Alaska Fairbanks, State of Alaska Section of Epidemiology and others to collect and analyze fish for contaminants throughout Alaska.

The subsistence diet our region enjoys is one of the healthiest diets a person could follow. The oils contained in fish and sea mammal meat are actually protective against heart attacks and strokes, in contrast to the standard cow meats and butter/milk products that contribute to coronary vascular disease and which are staples in the diet of the lower 48. YKHC was pleased to find that fish from our region are safe to eat. We will continue to encourage and promote studies, such as the proposed halibut study, to continually monitor our subsistence foods for presence of contaminants and safety.



YKHC Messenger
P.O. Box 528
Bethel, Alaska 99559
907-543-6000

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