

Five Tips for Eating Seafood Safely

If you read health and dietary magazines, you've probably learned that eating seafood is good for you. But is it possible to have too much of a good thing? Dr. Smith an osteopathic physician from Kentucky offers the following reasons why people—especially women of child-bearing age—should limit, but not eliminate, their consumption of fish.

“Fish and shellfish are packed with great nutrients, like omega-3 fatty acids, vitamins and minerals,” explains Dr. Smith. “These help prevent heart disease, lower blood pressure, and reduce the risk of heart attacks and strokes.”

However, seafood also contains traces of mercury, a contaminant found in fish that can affect brain development and the nervous system.

According to Dr. Smith, the risk from mercury by eating seafood is not a health concern for most people, but it can be an issue for pregnant women or women of child-bearing age since large amounts of mercury may harm an unborn baby.

“Even if a woman stops eating fish after she becomes pregnant, the fetus is exposed to what's already in the woman's body, including mercury from seafood she ate before getting pregnant,” says Dr. Smith. “In fact, mercury from fish is typically stored in the body for up to one year.”

That doesn't mean, however, that women of child-bearing age should NEVER eat fish.

“Fatty acid and omega-3 in fish can actually help increase a fetus' brain development,” says Dr. Smith.

So, what are we supposed to think when it comes to incorporating fish into our diets? Dr. Smith provides the following five guidelines for eating seafood safely:

1. **Eat up to 12 ounces (two six-ounce servings) per week** of a variety of seafood that is lower in mercury, such as shrimp, canned light tuna or salmon.

2. If you like albacore tuna, make that your only serving of fish for the week. **Albacore tuna has more mercury than canned light tuna.**
3. **Avoid eating large fish**, such as swordfish or king mackerel, since bigger fish tend to have the highest levels of mercury. These fish can't eliminate mercury as fast as they take it in. All women of child bearing years and children should avoid eating these types of fish.
4. **When you're doing your own fishing**, check local advisories about the safety of fish caught in local lakes, rivers and coastal areas. Information about bodies of water with high levels of contaminants is available from local public health departments and by contacting the United States Environmental Protection Agency at www.epa.gov. If no advice is available, eat only six ounces of fish caught from local waters and then don't consume any other fish during the week.
5. When preparing a fish caught yourself, it is important to **clean the fish by trimming away the skin and fatty tissue**. This helps reduce the pollution in the fish.

And if you think you can avoid mercury by eliminating seafood from your diet, you're wrong.

"There is no way to avoid mercury completely," says Dr. Smith. "Even vegans are exposed to mercury in drinking water and in the water that helps plants grow."

The good news, according to Dr. Smith, is that people naturally get rid of small amounts of mercury in their bodies over time.

"All in all, as long as you follow the guidelines to eating seafood safely, the health benefits to eating seafood will far outweigh the risks from mercury," concludes Dr. Smith.

Preventive medicine is just one aspect of care osteopathic physicians provide. DOs are fully licensed to prescribe medicine and practice in all specialty areas, including surgery. DOs are trained to consider the health of the whole person and use their hands to help diagnose and treat their patients.