

# Fish: To Eat or Not to Eat?

## A Guide for Expectant and Breastfeeding Women, Infants and Young Children



Both the benefits and the dangers of eating fish are often in the news. One day it's all about the health benefits of eating fish. The next day, mercury in fish grabs the headlines!

If you're a bit confused about what to eat and what not to eat, this fact sheet is for you. It will clear up any questions you may have about the safety of eating fish for expectant and breastfeeding women, infants and young children.

### The Benefits of Eating Fish

Fish is a great source of protein and other nutrients. What's more, it is one of the few key dietary sources of beneficial omega-3 fats.

### Omega-3 Fats: Essential for Good Health

There are three different types of omega-3 fatty acids:

- ALA for alpha-linolenic acid
- EPA for eicosapentaenoic acid
- DHA for docosahexaenoic acid

*Of the three types, DHA is the most important omega-3 fat.*

### DHA Omega-3 Fat: Very Important During Pregnancy

For expectant and breastfeeding women, infants and young children, DHA is vital for the proper development of the brain, nerves, and eye tissue of your baby. If DHA is lacking during these important times, a baby's learning ability and vision can be affected.

### To ensure you get enough DHA omega-3 fat:

- Eat fish once or twice a week
- Use omega-3 eggs
- Use store-bought DHA milk e.g. Dairy Oh!
- Eat nuts & seeds such as walnuts, flaxseed and flaxseed oil
- Use canola oil & non-hydrogenated canola oil margarine
- Choose omega-3 fortified foods such as omega-3 yoghurt, cheese

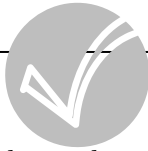
### The Risks of Eating Fish

Eating fish is not without risk. Some species may contain mercury, a strong toxin found in the muscle tissue of fish and shellfish.

Mercury is dangerous because it builds up in human tissue, particularly in unborn children. Unborn babies, infants and young children exposed to too much mercury can suffer from permanent nerve damage and delays in learning, walking and speech.

### The Good News

The good news is that only certain types of fish, usually the big predatory fish, contain dangerous levels of mercury. Women who are expecting or breastfeeding, infants and young children can still enjoy the benefits of eating fish by choosing the type of fish carefully.



### Fish TO Eat

Expectant and breastfeeding women, infants and young children can have up to two (2)\* fish meals each week of low mercury fish. **Low mercury level fish include:**

- All salmon – fresh, frozen or canned
- Other species:
 

Anchovies	Herring	Pollock	Tilapia
Catfish	Mackerel	Sardines	Trout
Clams	Oyster	Scallops	
Haddock	Perch	Shrimp	
- Breaded fish such as frozen fish cakes, fish sticks and breaded fish sandwiches are available in low-mercury fish varieties.

\*One adult serving is 170 grams (6oz); one child serving is 85 grams (3oz); one infant serving for infants 6-9 months is 1 tsp-2 Tbsp and infants 9-12 months is 2-3 Tbsp.



### Fish NOT to Eat

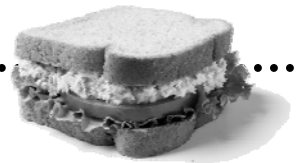
To stay within the safe levels of mercury exposure, avoid these medium and high mercury level fish.

**Medium and high mercury fish include:**

- |          |               |           |
|----------|---------------|-----------|
| Bass     | King Mackerel | Snapper   |
| Bluefish | Marlin        | Squid     |
| Cod      | Orange Roughy | Swordfish |
| Grouper  | Shark         | Tilefish  |
| Halibut  | Smelt         | Whitefish |

And the following types of tuna:

- Fresh or frozen tuna steaks
- Canned “white” or “light” tuna: listed on the label as Albacore, Bluefin or Yellowfin.



### What about Canned Tuna?

Canned tuna deserves special mention because it is a popular choice of fish for Canadians.

As noted above canned white tuna (Albacore and Bluefin) and canned light tuna (Yellowfin) contain high levels of mercury and therefore should be avoided.

**Skipjack canned tuna** is between a low and medium mercury level fish and has been identified as the tuna species with the least amount of mercury. For this reason expectant and breastfeeding women, infants and young children can safely enjoy one serving\* of skipjack tuna each week, as long as their second fish meal is of a low mercury level fish.

\*One adult serving is one 170g can; one child serving is half a 170g can; one infant serving for infants 6-9 months is 1 tsp -2 Tbsp and infants 9-12 months is 2-3 Tbsp.



### To Supplement or Not? The Next Hot Topic!

While supplements can provide the benefits of omega-3 fats, at this time supplements can not be recommended as a safe alternative to eating fish because research findings on the amount of contaminants they contain is inconsistent.

### What about Sport Fish?

Sport fish are fish caught in local lakes and rivers. Some of these fish may not be safe to eat. If you eat sport fish regularly check the Guide to Eating Ontario Sport Fish at [www.ene.gov.on.ca/envision/guide/index.htm](http://www.ene.gov.on.ca/envision/guide/index.htm).

Would you like more information on A Healthy Start for You and Your Baby? Visit our Web site at [www.pdhu.on.ca](http://www.pdhu.on.ca), the Perth District Health Unit, or call Health Line at 519-271-7600 ext 267.

Adapted from the Region of Waterloo Public Health, Fish Facts for Families: Choose Fish Low in Mercury fact sheet. Produced by the Perth District Health Unit.