

Original page:

<http://my.webmd.com/content/Article/78/95768.htm>

FDA to Warn Pregnant Women to Limit Tuna No More Than 12 Ounces of Seafood Per Week, Officials Say; Consumer Group Says Guidelines Fall Short

By [Sid Kirchheimer](#)
WebMD Medical News

Reviewed By [Michael Smith, MD](#)
on Thursday, December 11, 2003

Dec. 11, 2003 -- To protect developing babies from high levels of potentially brain-damaging mercury, the government plans to warn women who are pregnant, nursing, or even considering having children to eat no more than two to three servings of fish each week. And for the first time, federal officials are making specific recommendations concerning tuna -- second only to shrimp as the most consumed seafood in the U.S.

But one consumer group tells WebMD the new guidelines don't go far enough and it plans on challenging the guidelines in court.

In revising a broader advisory on the dangers of eating seafood with elevated levels of mercury, the government plans to issue cautions to women of childbearing age, as well as young children, to have no more than one can of tuna per week, an FDA spokesman tells WebMD.

The revised guidelines, discussed in a two-day meeting of FDA and EPA officials that concludes today, will be formally approved in the spring. But an FDA spokesman tells WebMD of the details.

"We don't see tuna as being any more dangerous than other fish out there, and it's not in the 'avoid' category," says a spokesman for FDA Chief Medical Officer David Acheson, MD. "But women of childbearing age and young children should limit their consumption of tuna to no more than 4 to 6 ounces per week." A standard can of tuna contains 6 ounces.

In 2001, the FDA issued its previous advisory, warning women of childbearing age to totally avoid four types of fish -- shark, swordfish, tilefish, and king mackerel -- because of their high levels of mercury.

In the revision drafted this week, the FDA and EPA continue to caution women of childbearing age against having any of those four types of fish and recommend they not eat more than 12 ounces of all types of seafood in a given week. That's the equivalent of two to three modest servings.

"But they should mix the types of fish and shellfish they eat, and not eat the same type of fish or shellfish more than once a week -- including tuna," the spokesman tells WebMD. The advisory also urges women to check for local advisories of any fish caught in area waters.

These recommendations do not apply to men, women who are not or will not become pregnant, or older children. The spokesman says the cautions apply to "young children" but couldn't specify a particular age group.

Controversy Brews

These revisions come after consumer groups -- and primarily the non-profit Environmental Working Group -- obtained CDC data indicating that canned albacore, also known as white tuna, had mercury levels that were twice as high as past FDA estimates. That data also indicate that other popular types of fish, including grouper, orange roughy, and sea bass, are even more contaminated but were not specifically mentioned in the revisions.

"We're so unsatisfied with these revisions that we're going to file a legal challenge to stop this new advisory," says the group's Senior Vice President Richard Wiles. "They have made no changes of any substance to the old advice, which was found to be inadequate by the FDA's own independent review."

Wiles tells WebMD that legal action could come as early as Friday.

"We're now crossing our T's and dotting our I's," he says. "There's a lot of fish that has high levels of mercury that the FDA is doing nothing about: Orange roughy and grouper have higher levels and bluefish is about the same level as tuna. And others fall just below levels found in tuna -- including fish sticks, cod, pollack, and haddock. If you're a fish eater, these are the fish you most likely consume."

Studies by the CDC indicate that nearly 8% of childbearing-age American women currently have blood levels of mercury that exceed "safe" amounts as determined by the government and the National Academy of Sciences, Wiles says.

The FDA spokesman tells WebMD that his agency has no plans to place warning labels on tuna or other types of fish tested and found to contain levels of mercury that can cause brain damage in young children. "We do plan a comprehensive education campaign including brochures and working with women's doctors," he says.

The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists has issued no new policy recommendations regarding limits of tuna or other fish for pregnant or nursing women. An ACOG representative is attending the two-day advisory session and will report back when it's completed, according to an ACOG spokeswoman. That group has previously advised women not to consume the four types of fish on the FDA's "avoid" list.

SOURCES: Spokesman for David Acheson, MD, chief medical officer, Food and Drug Administration, Rockville, Md. Richard Wiles, senior vice president, Environmental Working Group, Washington, D.C. The American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology.