

# Smart fish choices for your healthy diet

By Chris Walker

Fish is good food, packed with protein. But eating too much of certain varieties of fish carries real health risks for everyone.

Fish and seafood – even fish in Montana waters – can be contaminated with metals. Consumption of contaminated fish is especially hazardous for children and for pregnant women because the metal contamination is toxic to the brain and affects children’s development. In adults, mercury exposure from food or other sources can impair memory and mental sharpness.

In the past 18 months, the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services reported seven cases of mercury poisoning for which the suspected source was eating a lot of fish.

Mercury contamination isn’t limited to Montana or to sport fishing. In one recent Montana poisoning case, the person had been eating canned tuna daily for more than two years.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention cautions Americans to limit their consumption of some fish and seafood. To protect your health, it’s important to know the risks so you can make well informed food choices.

Metals contamination in rivers, lakes and oceans can be naturally occurring or pollution from industrial sources. The Montana Department of Environmental Quality and DPHHS have charts online that detail which fish at what locations may be contaminated with mercury, arsenic or cadmium. You can find this information by searching online for “Montana Sport Fish Consumption Guidelines”.

## **Lake trout guidelines**

Generally, smaller fish are less likely to have accumulated metals while the largest fish are riskier. For example, the Montana DEQ advises people to avoid eating lake trout that are over 28 inches long. Limit consumption to one meal a month for lake trout 20-28 inches long, one meal a week for lake trout 15-20 inches and two meals per week for lake trout smaller than 15 inches in length.

Proper cleaning and cooking reduces metal contaminants. Montana anglers are advised to filet fish and remove the skin, cut away fat from the back, side and belly. Bake or broil the trimmed fish on a rack or broil it so remaining fat drips away.

DEQ considers an adult serving to be 8 ounces of raw fish or 6 ounces of cooked fish. A child’s serving is 4 ounces of raw fish or 3 ounces cooked.

Fish that generally can be eaten more frequently include rainbow trout less than 18 inches, brook trout, perch, bluegill and black crappie. Smallmouth bass, walleye and northern pike should be eaten less often, the DEQ guidelines say.

## **Best tuna choices**

Consumer Reports recently tested several popular national brands of canned tuna and determined that all contained some level of mercury. Albacore tuna contained higher levels of mercury than light tuna in the Consumer Reports tests.

This doesn't mean everyone should stop eating tuna. Instead, know your limits. Based on its tests, Consumer Reports recommends that nonpregnant adults limit their consumption to not more than three five-ounce cans of chunk light tuna per week or one can of albacore.

Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommends that adults eat at least 8 ounces of fish or seafood a week. Women who are pregnant or breastfeeding are advised to choose a variety of fish that are lower in mercury, such as cod, salmon, sardines, shrimp, scallops or trout, according to the Food and Drug Administration. To learn more about FDA fish and seafood consumption recommendations, visit <https://www.fda.gov/media/102331/download>.

*Chris Walker, a communicable disease case investigator at RiverStone Health, can be reached at 406-247-2123.*