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Description

While many Americans -- especially pregnant women -- are advised to eat more fish for their health, the EPA and FDA urge awareness and limited consumption of fish with highest levels of mercury.

Keywords

Fish, Mercury, Mercury Levels, Contaminants, Poison, Toxic, Raw Fish, Sushi, Swordfish, Mackerel, King Mackerel, Tilefish, Salmon, Cod, Shrimp, Trout, Tuna, Canned Tuna, Tuna Steaks, Albacore Tuna, Seafood, Power Plants, Coal-Fired, Run-Off, Ocean Water, Healthy Diet, Pregnant Women, Nursing Mothers, Children's Hospital, Boston, Jeremy Piven, Broadway, EPA, Environmental Protection Agency, FDA, Food and Drug Administration, Periodic Table, Water Pollution, Food

Citation

Mercury in Fish: Which Fish Have Highest, Lowest Levels
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Transcript

Mercury in Fish: Which Fish Have Highest, Lowest Levels

LESTER HOLT, anchor:
You may have heard the recent story about actor Jeremy Piven abruptly quitting a starring role on Broadway, claiming he was terribly ill from mercury poisoning. He blamed it on a constant diet of sushi. While his diet may not be typical of most Americans, it is the latest in a long-running controversy over how much fish we should eat, a question that applies most urgently to pregnant women and nursing mothers. NBC's chief science correspondent Robert Bazell reports.

ROBERT BAZELL reporting:
Naomi White-Randolph loves fish, especially raw sushi, but when she was pregnant with her three-day-old daughter, Sariah, she had to change her diet.

Ms. NAOMI WHITE-RANDOLPH: To find out that there's some sushi that I couldn't eat was absolutely devastating to me.

BAZELL: There's no question that fish is healthy. But toxic mercury, mostly from coal-fired power plants, makes its way into the ocean, where it can end up in the meat of certain fish. The Environmental Protection Agency and the Food and Drug Administration advise pregnant and nursing women to eat 12 ounces, about two servings, of fish a week and avoid fish with high mercury content. But the message got confusing this month when proposed new guidelines from the FDA said pregnant and nursing women should eat even more fish.

Dr. DAVID BELLINGER (Children's Hospital Boston): The problem is that fish contains both beneficial nutrients and, potentially, contaminants.

BAZELL: In fact, recent studies of large numbers of children show two things: Kids whose mothers eat a lot of fish during pregnancy do better developmentally, but if the mother has too much mercury in her blood, they do worse. So the key is knowing which fish is safest. Those with high levels of mercury...
include swordfish, king mackerel and tile fish. Seafood with low levels of mercury include salmon, cod, shrimp, trout and most small fish. What about the most popular fish, tuna?

Dr. BELLINGER: Tuna is a complicated one because not all tuna is the same.

BAZELL: Canned albacore tuna can have some mercury so the government advises pregnant and nursing mothers to eat only one serving a week. But tuna steaks, including the pieces used for sushi, can have high levels, which is why Naomi White-Randolph had to eat differently to help protect little Sariah.

Ms. WHITE-RUDOLPH: It's going to keep you safe.