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National Mercury Testing Program

What is Mercury and Who Is Affected by Mercury Pollution?

Mercury is a neurotoxin that is most often emitted as a byproduct from power plants, incinerators, and chemical factories. Emissions from dirty sources like coal-fired power plants account for the single largest source of mercury emissions in the United States-- approximately 42%.

Elevated levels of mercury are harmful to everyone, but women of childbearing age are especially vulnerable to mercury contamination. Mercury adversely affects fetal development of the brain and central nervous system. Infants can be further exposed to mercury through their mothers' breast milk. Exposure at early stages of human development is particularly dangerous and can affect the development of memory, attention, and language.

According to scientists at the Environmental Protection Agency and the Center for Disease Control, one in eight (around 630,000) American children are born with potentially unsafe levels of mercury in their blood.

How are People Exposed to Mercury?

When substances containing mercury are burned, it is released into the atmosphere and then falls to Earth in rain and snow, making its way into our lakes and rivers. Once present in the water, toxic mercury is absorbed through the muscle tissue of fish.

Most human exposure to mercury comes from consuming contaminated fish. As a result, federal and state governments warn people to limit consumption of certain species of fish caught in waters contaminated with mercury.

People that work in industries that regularly handle mercury (dentistry, thermometer production) or deal with high levels of mercury emissions (electricity generation through coal, chlorine production through chloralkali factories, insecticides, etc) are also at an increased risk for exposure to mercury.

What is the Solution?

There is growing concern and scientific evidence that many Americans are being exposed to harmful levels of mercury pollution. The Food and Drug Administration is charged with protecting the public from unsafe mercury levels in store-bought fish. Unfortunately, their recommendations are vague and provide insufficient information to the public, stating only that "women might wish to modify the amount and type of fish they consume if they are planning to become pregnant, nursing, or feeding a young child." Moreover, because mercury stays in the body for long periods of time, the solution is not just to warn pregnant women not to eat fish, but to reduce mercury emissions altogether.

Because electricity generation from coal contributes the largest share of mercury emissions, the best way to reduce mercury pollution is to switch to clean, renewable energy. Renewable energy uses the power of the wind, sun, and other sources to create power without mercury byproducts. Clean energy technology is readily available, and is the only certain path toward achieving a healthy, safe future.

A coalition of concerned groups, including Greenpeace, is calling for a new energy initiative that would require a dramatic increase in renewable energy and energy efficiency. Not only would these measures lower mercury levels, but they would also help to solve global warming, create millions of jobs, reduce dependence on foreign oil, and save billions of taxpayer dollars. Please contact your Congressional Representatives to let them know that you support the development of clean energy, and so should they.

Greenpeace Mercury Level Hair Sampling Program

Greenpeace has initiated a research study that is being conducted by the Environmental Quality Institute at the University of North Carolina-Asheville. This study seeks to ascertain the levels of mercury in people's bodies across the United States and Canada through the analysis of hair samples. The specific purpose of this study is to determine whether mercury exposure levels in the United States are exceeding standards set to protect human health. To date 13,900 samples have been tested. At last count (2006), one in five women of childbearing age that were tested have mercury levels exceeding the EPA's recommended limit.

If you have questions about our program, please visit our website, www.greenpeace.org and search for mercury, or contact us at 1-800-326-0959 or mercury@wdc.greenpeace.org

Fish Consumption Advisories for Women of Childbearing Age and Small Children

These advisories are intended for women of childbearing age and small children. Developing fetuses and small children are especially susceptible to health impairment from elevated mercury levels. However, all people who wish to reduce their exposure to mercury should adhere to these advisories, and also work to reduce mercury pollution at its source (especially coal-fired power plants, the largest single source of mercury emissions). To find specific fish advisories in your state, visit:
www.epa.gov/waterscience/fish

Fish that are relatively low in mercury and can be safely eaten in moderation:

Abalone (farmed), Anchovies, Atlantic Mackerel, Butterfish, Calamari/Squid, Catfish, Caviar (farmed), Clams, Crab (king), Crawfish/Crayfish, Flounder, Haddock, Hake, Herring, Lobster (spiny/rock), Mussels (farmed), Oysters, Perch (ocean), Salmon (wild, from Alaska), Sardines, Scallops, Shad, Sole, Sturgeon (farmed), Trout, Whitefish.

Eat Sparingly (less than 3 6-ounce servings per month):

Carp, Crab (dungeness, blue, snow), Mahi Mahi, Pacific Cod Perch (freshwater), Snapper.

Avoid (less than three 3-ounce servings in a month):

Bluefish, Croaker, Halibut, Lobster (American/Maine), Rockfish, Salmon (wild, Atlantic), Sea Bass (excluding Chilean Sea Bass, which should be completely avoided), Sea Trout (Weakfish).

Do Not Eat (extremely high levels of mercury): Chilean Sea Bass, Grouper, King Mackerel, Marlin, Monkfish, Orange Roughy, Shark, Shrimp, Swordfish, Tilefish, Tuna (all tuna, including fresh tuna, canned white albacore, canned chunk light, Bigeye, Bluefin, and Yellowfin).

Unsustainable Red List Species

Apart from many fish that have high levels of mercury, our oceans are also being fished into oblivion. Vast factory ships roam the high seas vacuuming up fish faster than stocks can replenish themselves. Destructive new techniques, such as bottom trawling, devised to catch previously inaccessible deep-sea species, are wreaking havoc with fragile underwater ecosystems. Eventually, pillaging the ocean of fish will lead to fish extinction, extinction of marine life that feeds on specific fish, and the collapse of the fishing industry. To learn more about red list species, and the supermarkets that sell them, visit:
www.greenpeace.org/seafood

Do Not Eat (fisheries that are on the brink of collapse): Atlantic Cod/Scrod, Atlantic Salmon, Atlantic Halibut, Atlantic Sea Scallop, Chilean Sea Bass, Greenland Halibut, Hoki, Grouper, Monkfish, Ocean Quahog, Orange Roughy, Pollock, Rays, Red Snapper Shark, Skates, Tropical Shrimp, Swordfish, Tuna (Bigeye, Bluefin, Yellowfin), Redfish.

Fish That Are Both High in Mercury *and* on the Unsustainable Red List

The following fish have extremely high mercury content *and* are on the brink of collapse:
Chilean Sea Bass, Grouper, Monkfish, Orange Roughy, Shrimp, Shark, Swordfish, and Tuna.