
December 23, 2008**EDITORIAL**

So Is Fish Safe to Eat or Not?

The federal government has been trying to persuade pregnant and breast-feeding women to limit their intake of fish because of mercury contamination. Now some federal scientists are arguing that these women should actually increase their fish consumption. The behind-the-scenes disagreement is fierce and raises serious questions for consumers.

The current official advice from the Food and Drug Administration and the Environmental Protection Agency is that pregnant and nursing women and young children can safely eat up to 12 ounces — roughly two servings — of most fish a week, but should limit their intake of albacore tuna to 6 ounces a week and avoid entirely four species of fish containing high levels of mercury.

Now the two agencies are at loggerheads over the two-serving limit. The F.D.A. has circulated a draft report suggesting that the vast majority of fetuses and infants would actually benefit if their mothers ate more than two servings of fish a week because fish contain highly beneficial nutrients that aid in brain development. The F.D.A.'s scientists argue that those benefits outweigh any potential harm.

Those contentions are sharply disputed by specialists at the E.P.A. who charged that the report had “serious scientific flaws,” relied on questionable models and should not be used as a basis for decision-making. That is a strong indictment that must be answered before the public can place any confidence in the F.D.A.'s judgment.

Meanwhile, experts caution that consumers should choose from fish that are low in mercury, such as shrimp, canned light tuna, salmon, pollock and catfish.

Although the draft strikes some as another last-minute effort by the Bush administration to weaken industry oversight, it can provide a useful opportunity to review whether mercury warnings have gone too far in driving women away from a potentially beneficial food source.

The report is still undergoing revision at the F.D.A., which pledges to publish it for comment before deciding how to proceed. Only then will a wide array of experts be able to tell if the final recommendations make sense or are dangerously flawed.

Copyright 2008 The New York Times Company

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)
