

10 Essential Mercury Facts

1. **The Food and Drug Administration writes that its dietary mercury guidelines were “established to limit consumers’ methyl mercury exposure to levels 10 times lower than the lowest levels associated with adverse effects.”** Americans who consume twice as much mercury as the FDA recommends are still protected by a 500-percent cushion. The same generous safety margin applies to the Environmental Protection Agency’s mercury “Reference Dose.” And the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that zero percent of American children exceed the EPA’s hyper-cautionary guideline.
2. **The U.S. government’s Institute of Medicine (a division of the National Academies of Science) warned in a major 2006 report that a “spill-over effect” from one-size-fits-all fish warnings could deny most consumers the health benefits of seafood consumption.** This report demonstrates a severe disagreement between serious scientists and activists who demand “warning” signs (aimed at *all* consumers) on grocery-store fish counters.
3. **There are no scientifically documented cases of Americans developing mercury poisoning from eating commercially available fish.** The only documented cases in the medical literature are from Japan in the 1950s and 1960s, following a massive industrial spill of mercury into fishing waters. Mercury levels today (in both fish and people) are nowhere near the levels measured during this tragic episode.
4. **The federal government’s mercury-in-fish recommendations are based largely on a single study whose participants were exposed to mercury by eating whale meat—not fish.** The study was conducted in Denmark’s Faroe Islands. Unlike fish, whale meat is contaminated with a variety of pollutants, so isolating mercury’s effects is practically impossible. In 2004 the lead Faroe researcher acknowledged in *The Boston Herald* that “fish consumption does not harm Faroese children ... the fish consumption most likely is beneficial to their health.”
5. **A twelve-year study conducted in the Seychelles Islands (in the Indian Ocean) recently found no negative health effects from exposure to mercury through heavy fish consumption.** On average, people in the Seychelles eat between 12 and 14 fish meals every week, and the mercury levels measured in the island natives are higher than those measured in the United States. But they suffered no ill effects from mercury in fish, and they received a significant health benefit from eating fish in the first place.
6. **In February 2007, *The Lancet* (the United Kingdom’s most prestigious medical journal) published U.S. government-funded research demonstrating a clear health benefit to children whose mothers ate large amounts of fish while pregnant.** Researchers wrote that they could find “no evidence to lend support to the warnings of the U.S. advisory that pregnant women should limit their seafood consumption.” Of the more than 9,000 pregnant women in this study, those who ate the most fish—regardless of mercury levels—had children with the highest IQ’s.

7. Studies published in 2005 in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* found that even eating small amounts of fish each week can result in a 17 percent lower risk of heart disease, a 12 percent lower risk of stroke, and (when eaten by pregnant women) a modest increase in children's IQ. The Omega-3 fats found in fish can also protect against Alzheimer's disease, arthritis, breast and prostate cancer, and many other conditions.
8. Researchers at Harvard University concluded that the health benefits of fish "greatly outweigh the risks," including those from trace amounts of mercury. Their study was published in *JAMA* (the Journal of the American Medical Association) in October 2006.
9. Over forty years of scientific research has established that selenium, a plentiful nutrient in fish, can effectively neutralize the toxicity of trace amounts of mercury in seafood. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, 16 of the 25 best sources of dietary selenium are ocean fish.
10. There's solid scientific evidence that the amount of mercury in fish has remained the same (or even *decreased*) during the past century. Researchers from Princeton University, Duke University, and the Los Angeles County Natural History Museum have all compared specimens of ocean fish preserved between 25 and 120 years ago with current samples of the same species. In these studies, mercury levels in the fish stayed the same or declined.

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