

Consumer Group: FDA Fails to Warn Pregnant Women of Mercury Risks from Tuna

Mercury Policy

WASHINGTON (PRNewswire-USNewswire) — Today, FDA and EPA issued draft updated advice on fish consumption. While the draft is improved in several ways, the Mercury Policy Project was most disappointed with the agencies failure to require labeling and address exposure risks from American's consumption of canned tuna.

"Over one-third of American's exposure to methlymercury is from tuna, because tuna are higher mercury fish and Americans consume so much," said Michael Bender, director of the Mercury Policy Project. "Albacore 'white' canned tuna generally has 3 times as much mercury as 'light' tuna. However, Americans consume about three times as much of the light variety. Therefore, each variety—'white' and 'light'—contributes a staggering 16% of Americans' dietary exposure."

The updated FDA/EPA advice to pregnant women stresses the nutritional benefits and urges women to choose lower-mercury fish, both valid public health messages. However, says independent food safety scientist and MPP advisor Edward Groth III, PhD., "There are about a dozen recent studies that have found adverse effects of methylmercury in people eating just ordinary amounts of fish. Current advice needs to be more precautionary and more emphatic in guiding women to lower-mercury choices."

The Advice on canned tuna consumption is especially problematic, Groth says. It repeats the 2004 advice that women can eat up to 6 ounces a week of albacore tuna. "Albacore should be on the list of fish to avoid," Groth says.

While the advice on canned light tuna is more balanced (it stresses that no one should eat ONLY canned light tuna), it also says "Canned light tuna is fine," based on 2003 FDA calculations. That's simply wrong, Groth says. "Given the enormous role tuna plays in US mercury exposure, if women are going to eat more fish and also reduce their mercury exposure, they simply have to strictly limit their tuna consumption. There is no way around that," he adds.

"We are also disappointed with the recent A.P. interview where the FDA Commissioner says that the agency does not plan to require labels," said Bender. "How does FDA plan to effectively communicate without point-of-sale warnings? Our petition demonstrates that consumers are not getting the information they need."

MPP and CSPI recently filed a lawsuit in federal court against FDA for failing to respond to our 2011 petition requesting that consumers are provided clear,

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accurate and accessible information about mercury in seafood. The lawsuit seeks a court-ordered deadline since under its own regulations, FDA had 180 days to respond and its failure to do so violates federal law.

Before issuing final advice, the agencies will consider public comments, seek advice of its advisory committee and conduct focus groups.

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