

## New England Edition

6 Avery Street, Mystic, CT 06355  
(860) 572-0564 • Fax: (860) 536-1581

### Corporate Headquarters:

14 Ramsey Road, Shirley, NY 11967

Founded 1966 By

President/CEO: **Richard Reina**

Vice President/CFO:

**Richard S. Reina**

Corporate Administrator:

**Madalyn Lechner**

Managing Editor:

**Zach Harvey** zharvey@thefisherman.com

Advertising Sales Manager:

**Charlie Stone** cstone@thefisherman.com

Circulation Manager/

Advertising Sales Representative:

**Dale Nicholson** dnicholson@thefisherman.com

Office Manager:

**Katrina Smith** ksmith@thefisherman.com

Field Editors:

**Tim Coleman, Ed Nowak, Charley Soares,  
Rod Teehan, Keith Reynolds, Greg Metcalf**

Publisher:

**Michael Caruso** mcaruso@thefisherman.com

Executive Editor:

**Patrick Sciacca** psciacca@thefisherman.com

Senior Editor:

**Fred Golofaro** fgolofaro@thefisherman.com

Boating/Electronics Editor:

**Capt. John N. Raguso** capt.john@att.net

Conservation Editor:

**Al Ristori**

Staff Photographers:

**Dick Mermon, Tim C. Smith**

Art Director:

**Mihai Margineanu**

mmargineanu@thefisherman.com

Production Supervisor:

**Donna-Marie Johnson-Fiorello**

djohnson@thefisherman.com

Production Staff:

**Ken Incorvaia** kincorvaia@thefisherman.com

**Dominick Neuner** dneuner@thefisherman.com

**Krista Butler** kbutler@thefisherman.com

Subscription Manager:

**Shelly Ramunno** sramunno@thefisherman.com

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# MORE ON MERCURY...

By **Brian Toal, MSPH**

In the June 16<sup>th</sup>, 2011, issue of *The Fisherman*, Al Ristori addressed potential hazards of mercury in fish (*Mercury-Myth or Malady*). His column maintained that the hazards of mercury in fish are overstated. Rather than address his column point by point, I'd like to lay out what we've learned about the risks and benefits of eating fish—and how such information is taken into account by health officials. As an avid fisherman and a public health official, I want my fellow anglers to get a balanced picture of this somewhat complex topic.

Mercury is a common environmental contaminant worldwide. Some enters the environment through natural sources—forest fires or volcanoes. However, 70% of mercury released into the atmosphere comes from man-made sources, including coal-fired power plant emissions. Most mercury concentrated in fish comes from air-borne emissions that settle into our water bodies where it enters the food chain and contaminates fish.

Air-borne mercury can reach fish via rain water or by attaching to particles. Once mercury enters a water body, it can be converted into "organic mercury" which is much more toxic than natural, or "elemental" mercury. In addition, organic mercury has a greater tendency to "bioaccumulate" as it moves through the aquatic food chain, especially in larger predatory fish, whose mercury levels may be thousands of times higher than those in water or sediment.

US states and other nations have issued fish consumption advisories to inform fish consumers about contaminants—mercury is the main one, though PCBs and pesticides are also monitored. Most Northeast states have issued freshwater mercury advisories, which usually recommend less consumption for "sensitive groups" (e.g. pregnant women and children), and some limitations for the general population. In Connecticut, our statewide freshwater mercury advisory recommends one meal per month of any locally-caught fish for the sensitive group, one per week for everyone else. It doesn't apply to most trout, since hatchery-reared fish aren't exposed.

Many states also offer advice for a select saltwater species, due primarily to PCB contamination (check your state's health department website for specifics). Most advisories recommend sensitive groups avoid striped bass or larger bluefish, and for the general public to reduce their consumption. Most Connecticut-caught saltwater species—flounder, fluke, scup, blackfish, etc.—tend not to accumulate mercury and are fine to eat.

State and federal governments also provide advice for various commercially-available species. Apex predators like shark and swordfish have the highest mercury levels, and carry a "do not eat" designation for the sensitive group. Fresh tuna steaks carry moderate levels of mercury, while light canned tuna has lower levels and can be eaten twice weekly even by pregnant women and children.

Yes, we know eating fish is good for our health. Numerous recent studies have confirmed that species with high levels of fish oils or Omega-3 fatty acids help prevent heart disease, and aid brain development in younger children. The problem is that some "healthy" fish also have high organic-mercury concentrations, which have been linked to heart disease and problems in nervous system development. Studies on fish-eating populations confirm that mercury exposure can harm infant brain development during pregnancy, while adult studies link mercury exposure to cardiovascular disease and heart attacks.

This can all be a little confusing: Is fish consumption a healthy choice or a risk? The answer, unfortunately, is "both." If you regularly eat high-omega-3, low-mercury fish, you'll reap health benefits. Conversely, if you eat a lot of high-mercury/low omega-3, you may amplify risks with no net benefits. It pays to be informed.

The Connecticut Department of Public Health's main message is that *eating fish is an important part of a healthy diet*, especially during pregnancy. Again, the key is to choose the species that deliver the benefits without the risks. Check your state's specific advisories. If a species is not listed, follow the generic federal advice: two meals a week of various fish. Bottom line: by all means keep on fishing and keep eating fish—just be smart about your selections.