

FDA Negligent On Mercury in Fish

Here's a corporate cover-up you probably haven't heard about yet:

Government scientists learn that a widely-used product can potentially harm children. Industry executives persuade government officials that warnings are unnecessary, and could create a panic. The public is not told.

Don't panic, but read on if you know young children or pregnant women who eat a lot of tuna fish.

The risk that may be lurking in that tasty tuna salad sandwich is caused by mercury, a type of air pollution that is spewed by power plants. When mercury gets into our streams, rivers, lakes, and oceans, it becomes methylmercury, a toxin that is consumed by fish. When those fish are eaten by children or pregnant women or nursing mothers, they can harm the developing nervous system of children, causing learning disabilities or other problems.

Pregnant mothers can expose their unborn child to mercury by eating contaminated fish, including canned tuna. Nursing women can pass methylmercury to their newborns through breast milk. Young children who eat a lot of tuna can also be harmed.

Last year, the FDA issued a warning urging pregnant women, nursing mothers, and young children to avoid eating shark, swordfish, tilefish (also called golden bass or golden snapper), and king mackerel because they contained dangerously high levels of methylmercury.

The FDA "advisory" also warned pregnant women and nursing mothers not to consume more than 12 ounces of any kind of fish per week. Unfortunately, the FDA did almost nothing to make sure that most Americans were aware of these warnings. Even worse, the FDA ignored the advice of their own scientists and of consumer groups to warn the public about the moderate rates of methylmercury in fresh tuna and canned tuna.

Warning the public about mercury in fish without mentioning the potential risks of the most popular fish in America would be like warning teens about the risk of drunk driving without mentioning beer.

A few days ago, at a meeting that received little press attention, the FDA asked their Advisory Committee what warnings the public should be given about mercury in fish. Several consumer groups, including ours, urged the FDA to tell the public what they knew about the possible dangers of tuna. We told them to put the warnings where they would do some good--on restaurant menus and on the packages of fish, including canned fish, which people buy in the store or fish market.

Advisory Committee members agreed with the consumers on several key points. They urged the FDA to do a better job of warning the public about the risks of mercury in fish, including tuna. They also urged the FDA to measure the levels of mercury in canned tuna and other fish, to find out how mercury levels may have increased or decreased in different parts of the country in the last few years.

Will The FDA Listen?

According to internal FDA documents, previous FDA methylmercury warnings were watered down after representatives of the tuna industry met privately with top FDA officials at least 3 times. Participating in some of these meetings were all the big fish in the tuna industry -- StarKist, Bumble

Bee, Chicken of the Sea, and the U.S. Tuna Foundation. Sitting across the table were some of the highest officials in the FDA.

Apparently, these industry executives were more persuasive than the National Academy of Sciences, which estimates that every year 60,000 children are born at risk for neurological problems due to methylmercury exposure in the womb. These problems could include learning disabilities, such as Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder.

Governors and other State officials are also aware of mercury contamination in fish. At least ten states mention tuna in their warnings about methylmercury, and 41 states have issued over 2,000 fishing advisories that restrict or ban the consumption of freshly-caught fish because of these concerns. The number of advisories has more than doubled in the last decade.

The FDA now has another chance to do its job to protect consumers from unsafe food. The FDA's Advisory Committee has made it clear that the FDA should do more to measure the levels of methylmercury in all fish, including tuna, and to use that information to provide warnings that consumers actually hear about.

If the FDA wants to hold any additional meetings with the fish industry, those meetings should be public, with consumers at the same table and reporters invited to watch. Had the FDA done that last time, women and children would be better informed about the possible risks of tuna and other fish, and the FDA's wishy-washy warnings wouldn't seem so...fishy.

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For more information about why the FDA needs to hear from consumers, see:

- <http://www.center4policy.org>
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DR. MERCOLA'S COMMENT:

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While not every fish is contaminated, most are. The risks of mercury contamination outweigh any benefits you may receive by eating fish. I also firmly believe that nearly all canned tuna is heavily contaminated with mercury and should be avoided, especially if you're pregnant.

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