

Sarah Palin

Governor

P.O. Box 110001

Juneau, AK 99811-0001

www.state.ak.us/



STATE OF ALASKA

Sherry Hill

Assistant Commissioner

for Public Affairs

907.465.1618

cell: 907.321.2838

sherry.hill@alaska.gov

Press Release

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Contact: Greg Wilkinson, Department of Health & Social Services,

(907) 269-7285, cell (907) 382-7032

Ann Potempa, Department of Health & Social Services,

(907) 269-7957, cell (907) 240-9158

Lynda Giguere, Department of Environmental Conservation,

(907) 465-5009, cell (907) 321-5491

Alaska Public Health releases new fish consumption guidelines

Alaska fish continues to be an important part of a healthy diet

(Anchorage, Alaska) — The health benefits from eating fish far outweigh any potential risk from the small amounts of contaminants found in most Alaska fish, according to guidelines released today by the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services. Public health scientists reaffirmed that fish continues to be an important part of a healthy diet for everyone, including pregnant and nursing women, and young children.

Recent data from the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation's Fish Monitoring Program, which has tested over 2,300 fish, reveal a wide variation of mercury content among the 23 species of fish sampled from Alaska waters between 2001 and 2006. Although all fish contain some level of mercury, levels in all species of Alaska wild salmon are very low. Further evidence that Alaska fish are healthy to eat comes from the state's ongoing free program that monitors mercury levels in the hair of Alaska women. State health officials have not received any reports of unsafe mercury levels in Alaskans who have eaten fish from local waters.

"Fish is an excellent source of lean protein, healthy omega-3 fatty acids, antioxidants and vitamins," said Dr. Lori Verbrugge, toxicologist with Public Health and lead author of the new report. "Although we recommend that everyone eat fish at least twice a week, our new guidelines offer specific advice on how to minimize mercury exposure for sensitive groups — namely women who are or can become pregnant, nursing mothers, and children age 12 and under."

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Too much mercury, a toxic metal found in the environment, can harm the developing nervous system of unborn babies and growing children.

Only five species of sport-caught Alaska fish had high enough mercury levels to warrant limiting consumption to two meals or less per week for these sensitive groups. Yelloweye rockfish, large lingcod (40-45 inches) and large halibut (50-90 pounds) can be eaten as often as twice a week, while salmon shark, spiny dogfish, very large lingcod (over 45 inches) and very large halibut (over 90 pounds) can be consumed as often as once a week. Because commercially caught halibut weigh an average of about 33 pounds, halibut purchased from stores or restaurants is safe for this group to eat up to four times a week.

All other groups, including adult men, teenage boys, and women who cannot become pregnant, have no restrictions and are encouraged to consume as much fish from Alaska waters as they want. Those who are concerned about the mercury levels in certain fish species can minimize their risk by choosing fish lower in mercury, like smaller halibut and wild Alaska salmon.

The ADEC's Fish Monitoring Program will continue to collect and test fish for environmental contaminants, and the consumption guidelines will be updated as needed. Begun in 2001, the program is an ongoing collaborative effort to collect and test Alaska fish for certain environmental contaminants. Partners include the Alaska Departments of Health and Social Services and Fish and Game, the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the International Pacific Halibut Commission, and Alaska subsistence users and commercial fishermen.

Information on both the fish monitoring and human hair biomonitoring programs, as well as more comprehensive information for people who routinely eat more than two fish meals per week, is available online at <http://www.epi.hss.state.ak.us> and at <http://www.dec.state.ak.us/eh/vet/fish.htm>.

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