Why are we concerned about mercury?

Mercury is a neurotoxin - at high levels it can damage the developing brains of babies (including babies in the womb) and children. Mercury levels in most Alaska fish are low, so any health effects would be very subtle. Still, health officials recommend a margin of safety to protect our children's health.

Should I worry about eating fish?

Overall, mercury levels in Alaska fish are low, so the only people who need to think about limiting the amount of fish they eat are women who are or can become pregnant, nursing mothers, and children age 12 years and under. Women and children can still get the benefits of eating fish by choosing to eat fish that are low in mercury, like salmon.

Measuring Mercury in Humans

Although mercury concentrations in fish can give us an idea of possible mercury exposure, Alaska has a program that tests for actual mercury levels in humans. If you are a woman of child-bearing age, you can get your hair tested and find out your own mercury levels - for free!

The Alaska Division of Public Health will analyze a small hair sample from any Alaskan woman of child-bearing age for mercury. A simple hair test can tell you how much mercury you may have in your body. For more information on hair mercury monitoring, or to arrange for testing, contact the Environmental Public Health Program at the Alaska Division of Public Health, 3601 C Street, Suite 540, Anchorage, AK 99503, 907-269-8000, http://www.epi.hss.state.ak.us/eh/default/stm

When Deciding What to Eat, Remember...

Subsistence foods, including almost all fish, are better for you and less expensive than store-bought foods. Also, the subsistence way of life helps keep Alaska Native cultures healthy and traditional ways alive.

Fish are nutritious, with vitamins A, E, and C, iron, zinc, protein, and very important omega-3 fatty acids. These nutrients help keep your nervous system, your immune system, and your heart healthy, and are important for a healthy pregnancy.

Subsistence foods are low in sugar and saturated fats. Store-bought foods can have unhealthy amounts of sugars and fats, which can contribute to obesity and diabetes, both of which are at epidemic levels in Alaskans, and heart disease. All these diseases are increasing among Alaska Natives.

Most subsistence foods are very clean. For example, all five species of Alaska salmon have very low contaminant levels and are safe to eat in unlimited quantities.

For more information on fish consumption guidelines, or the benefits of eating subsistence foods, contact the Environmental Public Health Program, 907-269-8000, Alaska Division of Public Health, 3601 C Street, Suite 540, Anchorage, AK 99503.