

If I Catch It, Can I Eat It?

A Guide to Safe Eating of Fish Caught in Connecticut



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Pamphlet Based Upon 1997 Fish Advisory

Background:

Fish from Connecticut's waters are a good, low-cost source of protein. Unfortunately, fish tend to take up chemicals such as mercury and polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) so that eating fish may affect your family's health. The Connecticut Department of Public Health (CTDPH) issues advisories for decreasing fish consumption when chemical levels are unsafe.

Why Should I Follow This Advice?

This advice is meant to protect the health of families who eat fish caught in Connecticut.

Here are the dangers to health.

- **Mercury** is a toxic metal that can build up in your body and damage your nervous system and kidneys. Women who eat fish containing mercury before or during pregnancy may have children who are slow to develop and learn.
- **PCBs** are highly toxic chemicals which can build up in your body. They are most dangerous during pregnancy and to young children. PCBs also may cause cancer.
- **Chlordane** is a highly toxic pesticide that can cause cancer and harm during pregnancy.

What Does The Fish Consumption Advisory Say?

The advisory lets you know how often you can safely eat fish from Connecticut's waters. This advice does not apply to fish bought in stores or eaten in restaurants. It provides two types of advice: 1) a general advisory that applies to most of the freshwater fish in the state; and 2) specific advice for those fish where special warnings are needed due to higher chemical levels. Refer to the chart and map to see which fish to limit or avoid from Connecticut's waters. Some people are more likely than others to be harmed by chemicals in fish. These people are at higher risk from eating fish.

Am I In The High Risk Group?

- You are in the **High Risk Group** if you are a *pregnant woman*, a *woman planning to become pregnant within 1 year*, or a *child under the age of 6*. *Nursing mothers* are also considered part of the High Risk Group for those fish where PCBs are a concern (see chart). This is because PCBs are passed from mothers to children in breastmilk.

- If you are in the High Risk Group, you should limit eating most fish from Connecticut's waters to *one meal per month*. As shown in the chart, you should not eat certain fish at all since they have especially high levels of mercury, PCBs or the pesticide chlordane.
- If you do not fit into the High Risk Group, you are in the **Low Risk Group**. In general, people in this group should eat *no more than one fish meal per week* from Connecticut's waters (see chart).



Are Trout Safe To Eat?

Trout from Connecticut's waters are safe to eat because they usually have little contamination. However, there are limits on trout from the Housatonic River due to PCBs and on large trout from lakes due to mercury (see chart).

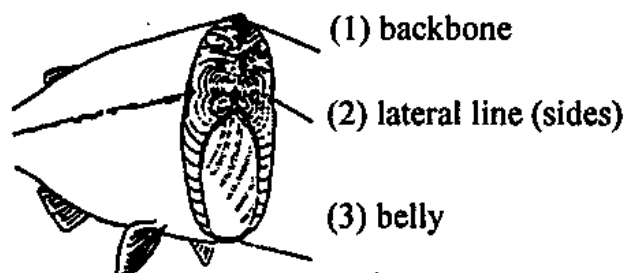
Who Should Follow This Advice?

This advice should be followed by all people who eat fish from Connecticut waters. Everyone fits into either the High Risk or Low Risk Group. Anglers and their families should be particularly aware of family members who are in the **High Risk Group** and make sure that they follow the advisory.

What Else Can I Do To Eat Fish Safely?

PCBs are mostly in the fatty portions of fish. You will eat less PCBs if you remove skin and other fatty parts, and if you cook fish on a rack (broil) so that fat can drip away from the flesh.

Fatty portions to remove before cooking



(Remove and do not eat the organs, head, skin and the dark fatty tissue along the back bone, lateral lines and belly.)

Mercury is in the edible (fillet) portion of fish. Therefore, you cannot lower your exposure to mercury by cooking or cleaning the fish.

It is important to remember that large fish tend to have the highest levels of PCBs and mercury. Therefore, eat small fish (perch, small trout, sunfish, etc.) instead of large fish whenever possible.

How Do These Contaminants Get Into Fish?

Mercury and PCBs can build up in fish to levels that are thousands of times higher than in the water. These contaminants enter the water from:

- Chemical spills that occurred in the past. Even though these spills have been stopped, it will take years for the mercury or PCB levels in the fish to drop to safe levels.
- Mercury in the air. Most of the mercury in Connecticut waters is believed to come here from other states.

The Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection (CTDEP) is working to improve water quality in Connecticut and is limiting the amount of mercury which can be released into the air.

If the Fish are Contaminated With Mercury or PCBs, Do These Contaminants Also Make The Water Unsafe For Swimming?

The amount of mercury and PCBs in Connecticut waters does not cause a health hazard from wading or swimming in the water.

However, do not assume that waters that are safe for fishing are also safe for swimming. Contact your town's Health Director to find out if the water is safe for swimming.

