

# A Guide to Eating Fish Safely in Massachusetts

While fish are an important part of a nutritious and varied diet, pregnant women should be aware of the possible dangers of eating fish caught in Massachusetts streams, rivers, lakes, ponds and some coastal waters.



Fish are an important part of a nutritious and varied diet. However, pregnant women, nursing mothers and women who may become pregnant should not eat any fish from freshwater bodies or certain fish and shellfish caught in some Massachusetts coastal waters. Children under 12 years old are also at risk and should follow these guidelines.

More specific consumption advice is available for certain freshwater bodies that have been tested at: [www.mass.gov/dph/fishadvisories](http://www.mass.gov/dph/fishadvisories) or by calling 617-624-5757.

## WHY ARE SOME FISH AND SHELLFISH NOT SAFE FOR PREGNANT WOMEN TO EAT?

Some fish and shellfish may contain chemicals that can harm you and your baby's health. This advice does not apply to fish stocked in lakes and ponds. Stocked fish are raised in fish hatcheries and then released into the wild.

Therefore, they are unlikely to spend enough time in a lake or pond to become contaminated.

## WHAT CHEMICALS ARE FOUND IN THESE FISH AND SHELLFISH?

Mercury and PCBs are the primary chemicals of concern. Mercury is a naturally occurring metal found in the environment. However, mercury is also released by coal burning power plants. Once released into the air, it can travel long distances and be deposited on soil and in water bodies. PCBs are man-made chemicals that were banned in the 1970s. However, due to their widespread use, PCBs can still be found in our environment and get into our food.

## HOW DO CHEMICALS AND METALS GET INTO THE FISH?

Chemicals and metals get into the fish from pollution in the water and sediments where they live. When larger fish eat smaller fish, they also ingest their chemicals.

## HOW DO THESE CHEMICALS AFFECT HEALTH?

Developing fetuses, nursing babies, and young children are affected by mercury. Small amounts can damage the brain even before birth. High levels of mercury can affect how well children learn, think, behave, and develop later in life. Children who have been exposed to mercury in the womb can experience symptoms even if their mothers do not.

## IS THERE A WAY OF CLEANING OR COOKING THE FISH TO GET RID OF THE CHEMICALS?

**No.** If a fish contains mercury, there is no way to remove the chemical. It cannot be cut, cleaned or cooked out.

## CAN THESE CHEMICALS AFFECT ADULTS AND OLDER CHILDREN?

**Yes.** At higher levels, adults and older children can experience health effects from these chemicals. Some of these chemicals can affect your memory or behavior. They can make your skin tingle or feel numb. Some are also suspected of causing liver problems and some types of cancer.

## SHOULD MY FAMILY AND I STOP EATING FISH ALTOGETHER?

**No. Absolutely not!** Fish is good for you and your family. It is a good source of protein, is low in fat, and may also protect you against heart disease. If you are pregnant, nursing, or may become pregnant, you and your children under 12 years old may safely eat 12 ounces (about 2 meals) per week of fish or shellfish not covered in this advisory. In order to avoid exposure to a harmful level of chemicals, eat a variety of fish and shellfish from a variety of sources, including commercial fish and recreationally caught marine fish and shellfish.

## CAN I EAT CANNED TUNA?

**Yes.** “Light” tuna as opposed to “Chunk White” tuna (also called albacore) contains smaller amounts of mercury. Pregnant women, women who may become pregnant, and nursing mothers should eat no more than 12 ounces

per week. Very small children, including toddlers, should also eat less than 12 ounces per week.

## Safe eating guidelines for pregnant women, women who may become pregnant, nursing mothers and children under 12 years old:

### Safe To Eat:

- Fish that are stocked in streams, rivers, lakes, and ponds in Massachusetts
- Cod, haddock, flounder and pollock in larger amounts

### Do Not Eat:

- Freshwater fish caught in streams, rivers, lakes, and ponds in Massachusetts\*
- Lobster from New Bedford Harbor
- Swordfish, shark, king mackerel, tilefish, and tuna steak
- Bluefish caught off the Massachusetts coast
- Lobsters, flounder, soft-shell clams and bivalves from Boston Harbor.

## Safe eating guidelines for everyone

### Do Not Eat:

- Fish and shellfish from the closed areas of New Bedford Harbor
- Lobster tomalley (the soft, green substance found in the body cavity of the lobster)

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## For More Information

For more information on how to choose fish that are safe to eat please contact:

**Bureau of Environmental Health  
MA Department of Public Health**  
250 Washington Street, 7th Floor, Boston, MA 02108  
Phone: 617-624-5757 | Fax: 617-624-5777 | TTY: 617-624-5286  
[www.mass.gov/dph/environmental\\_health](http://www.mass.gov/dph/environmental_health)

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