



MERCURY FAST FACTS

Mercury is a dangerous chemical that builds up in fish in the form of methylmercury, through a process called biomagnification. Animals high on the food chain carry the most mercury, and many of the fish we eat are very close to the top.

According to the *Madison Declaration on Mercury Pollution*, a consensus document released by over 1,100 of the world's top mercury scientists in March, 2007, about two-thirds of the mercury in the environment is attributable to human activities, such as coal-burning and chlorine production.

Fish and Mercury

Most human exposure to mercury is dietary, resulting from consumption of fish. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) reports that fish and fish products – both caught and purchased – are the greatest source of methylmercury ingested by humans. Governments in the [United States](#) and Europe have warned women and children against eating or limiting intake of particular fish species, including FDA's advice dealing with swordfish, shark, tilefish, king mackerel and tuna.

- About 85 percent of adults in the U.S. consume fish and shellfish at least once a month.
- 40 percent of adults in the U.S. consume fish and shellfish weekly.
- For high-end fish consumers, it is estimated that 87% of their exposure to mercury comes from eating seafood.

Medical Concerns

Mercury is primarily a neurotoxin, which means once in the body it attacks the central nervous system. Mercury can cause irreversible impairment to brain function in children in the womb and as they grow. Infants and children exposed to toxic doses of mercury have problems with attention span, language, visual-spatial skills, memory and coordination. Very high exposure levels in children can lead to brain damage, mental retardation, blindness, seizures and speech problems. Exposure also appears to weaken the heartbeat and the developing immune system.

In adults it can cause such symptoms as impaired coordination, tremors, irritability, memory loss, depression, blurred vision and a tingling sensation in the skin. Other concerns include:

- At least 12 scientific studies have linked mercury to cardiovascular disease, including increased blood pressure, irregular and increased heart rate and increased rates of death from heart attacks.
- Mercury is among a group of chemicals that can cause infertility according to the National Research Council.
- Mercury is classified as a "Possible Human Carcinogen" by the EPA and IARC.
- An EPA scientist estimated that **one in six American women** has enough mercury in her blood to pose neurological risks to her developing baby. This means hundreds of thousands of newborns each year may be exposed to enough mercury to hinder nervous system development.

For more information on mercury, visit www.oceana.org/mercury.