

Benefits of eating seafood

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In recent years, Americans have been drowning in stories about "toxic" tuna sushi and mercury levels in fish. Since most of those reports — including the federal government's — have relied on activists for health advice, it's no surprise that so many consumers are shying away from the seafood counter. But thanks to new research from Harvard University, the tables may finally be turning in favor of the scientific evidence about the benefits of eating seafood.

As this research confirms (again), fish really is brain food. The Harvard study, published in the *American Journal of Epidemiology*, found that pregnant women who eat fish regularly — more than two servings per week — have smarter children. Needless to say, this new finding flies in the face of the conventional wisdom that eating fish is risky business.

In reality, scientific experts have been telling us for years that the health benefits of omega-3 fatty acids in fish far outweigh the risks associated with consuming the trace amounts of mercury which have always been in fish. Unfortunately, much of that advice has been counterbalanced by a handful of noisy activists. These alarmists have exploited understandable concerns about contamination to hijack a national debate about food safety.

Anti-seafood groups like [Oceana](#) and Greenpeace are driven by political ideology, not human health. Some are interested in shutting down coal-fired power plants. Others want to promote vegetarianism.

But the entire medical literature contains zero fish-related cases of mercury poisoning in the United States. Not one. So, why all the worry about mercury in fish?

Largely due to the influence of these environmental radicals, the federal seafood advisories overestimated the dangers from mercury exposure and turned the scientific consensus on its head. As a result, much of the scientific evidence about the health benefits of consuming omega-3s in fish has been overlooked or ignored.

The Food and Drug Administration and Environmental Protection Agency based their seafood guidelines on a single study of an island population

that eats massive amounts of whale meat. Since whale is unusually high in mercury content, low in omega-3s and generally not part of the U.S. diet, that study was a poor model for advising Americans. But the FDA and EPA skewed the seafood risk even further by building a 1,000 percent safety cushion into the mercury limit of 1.0 part-per-million. That number, according to the FDA, is "10 times lower than the lowest levels associated with adverse affects."

Despite its flaws, the federal fish advice is still held up as the standard on which to evaluate seafood safety. As millions of Americans will recall, a January [New York Times](#) article cited the 1.0 limit to absurdly conclude that there were "high mercury levels" in tuna sushi. Since then, dozens of local news stations have followed suit and jumped on the fish-testing bandwagon. Nearly all of the resulting reports emphasize fish intake among pregnant women, which has steadily declined since the 2001 federal advisories.

Environmental groups have had a field day with the fish panic, putting out mercury wallet cards, alarmist calculators and even "choose your fish" text messaging services. But if the latest Harvard study shows anything, it's the unintended consequences of giving in to knee-jerk activist fears too quickly. Because of the unnecessary alarm about the "risks" of eating fish, pregnant women have actually been discouraged from eating enough fish to give their unborn children an intellectual head start.

Writing last year in the British medical journal *The Lancet*, [National Institutes of Health](#) researcher Dr. Joseph Hibbeln explained that the federal fish guidelines were "causing the very harm they intended to prevent." With the new Harvard study, Hibbeln's verdict seems sadly accurate.

Public health debates should be brought back into the hands of scientific experts. Our government's seafood guidelines should be amended to reflect the healthfulness of eating seafood. And American women of childbearing age should be running toward the fish counter, not away from it.

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