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PRESS RELEASE

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FDA Mercury Fish Warnings to Get 5 Times Stricter, Says Spokesperson *Physicians and Advocates Applaud New Standard to Reduce Mercury Exposure*

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is strengthening its advisory for warning consumers about unsafe mercury levels in fish, according to recent statements made by its chief medical officer to the news media. Today, physicians and advocates applauded news that FDA is basing its fish consumption advisory for mercury on EPA's reference dose -- a standard about five times more protective than the "action level" FDA has used for over 20 years.

"It's great news for the Medical community if FDA is adopting the standard used by EPA and supported by the National Academy of Sciences," said Dr. Jane Hightower, author of a landmark mercury poisoning study in *Environmental Health Perspectives* and a recent resolution on "Mercury in Food as a Human Health Hazard" adopted by the California Medical Association. "I do hope FDA will provide additional information, test the mercury content of fish and better advise the public about exposure risks to mercury."

On Saturday, Dr. David Acheson, chief medical officer of FDA's science office, was quoted in the *New York Times*, and earlier in the *Mobile Register*, as stating that "The FDA is basing its advisory on the EPA's reference dose." Dr. Acheson said that FDA was "trying to keep its advisory apace with the science and the data."

"After years of delays, FDA should revise its advisory to reflect the latest science and effectively warn the public," said Michael Bender, director of the Mercury Policy Project. "Women and parents of young children especially need the best information available about mercury in seafood and exposure risks in order to make informed choices."

The first indication that FDA was embracing EPA's standard came when a FDA scientist co-authored a paper published last Tuesday in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* analyzing the latest CDC mercury data -- after apparently "signing off" on using EPA's reference dose for determining exposure risks to mercury. According to the JAMA article, women who ate three or more servings of fish in the prior 30 days had mercury levels nearly four times higher than

those who ate no fish and children who ate fish had mercury levels almost twice as high as children who didn't. The Center for Disease Control data indicates that 8 percent of women of childbearing age have unsafe mercury levels, equating to 325, 000 babies born at risk each year.

"Fetuses, and therefore women of childbearing age, are most vulnerable to the toxic effects of mercury on the young brain," said Dr. David Wallinga, a physician with the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy. "If FDA is finally embracing a more health protective standard, it should help lower mercury levels in the one-tenth or so of young women carrying 'unsafe' mercury levels."

EPA's reference dose for human consumption of methyl mercury is 0.1 micrograms per kilogram per body weight per day and was supported by the congressionally-mandated National Academy of Sciences (NAS) study. The existing FDA "action level," or the level at which the FDA may take legal action to remove fish from the market, is set at 1.0 part per million methylmercury in fish tissue. When converted to units relevant for human consumption -- 0.5 micrograms per kilogram per body weight per day -- this value is about five times less stringent than the NAS-supported EPA level.

Last July, FDA's food safety committee recommended that the agency publicize a scientific rationale for continuing to use its action level, resume fish testing, add other high mercury fish to its "do not consume" list and warn pregnant women and young children to limit consumption of canned tuna, one of the most consumed fish in the U.S.

For more information see:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2003/04/05/health/05MERC.html>

<http://ehpnet1.niehs.nih.gov/docs/2003/5837/abstract.html>

<http://www.calphys.org/html/bb175.asp#112>

http://www.al.com/news/mobileregister/index.ssf?/xml/story.ssf/html_standard.xsl?/base/news/1049451634278540.xml

<http://www.mercurypolicy.org>

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