

Weighing risks and rewards, pregnant women in survey eat less fish

December 22 2014, by Krishna Ramanujan



A survey of women who recently gave birth found that many women change their behavior and consume less fish during pregnancy, in spite of receiving information about guidelines for types of fish and how much to eat during pregnancy.

Fish are a primary source of omega-3 fatty acids, which are important for development of eyes, brains and nervous systems in the fetus, according to recent research. But certain types of contaminated fish may expose fetuses to methylmercury – which is damaging during rapid brain development in unborn babies – and other chemicals, such as PCBs, found in fish can lead to lower birth rates.

State and federal guidelines recommend [pregnant women](#) and children limit consumption of certain species of fish and eat species with lower concentrations of contaminants, such as shrimp, canned light tuna, salmon, pollock and catfish, while avoiding swordfish, shark, king mackerel and tilefish.

The study, published in November in the journal *Environmental Research*, suggests that when pregnant women are faced with contradictory information, they focus on potential risks rather than the benefits and eat less fish.

"We think that changing the messages women receive, focusing on the benefits of fish consumption for their babies and children, might be a valuable approach toward increasing women's consumption of less-contaminated fish," said Nancy Connelly, a research specialist in the Department of Natural Resources and the paper's first author.

Messages to communicate could include describing the unique ways that fish are healthy, including the benefits of [omega-3 fatty acids](#) and [fish consumption](#) in general for the well-being of babies and children, said Connelly.

The researchers conducted a mail survey of women who recently gave birth in Minnesota, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania, and held focus groups with women of childbearing age living in the Great Lakes region.

Future research will further investigate actions and messages that might encourage pregnant women to eat more safe [fish](#) varieties.

Provided by Cornell University

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