

Benefits outweigh risk: most comprehensive fish study yet

Eating 'oily' fish cuts heart disease risk by a third

Sharon Kirkey, CanWest News Service

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Just one three-ounce serving of salmon or similar oily fish a week lowers the risk of dying from a heart attack by more than a third, a new study shows.

Concerns have been raised in recent years that salmon and other fish are full of chemicals _ notably mercury, dioxins and polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs _ and that people dare not eat fish more than once every few months.

But a new study by the Harvard School of Public Health that is believed to be the most comprehensive review of its kind, concludes one to two servings of fish per week reduces death from coronary heart disease by 36 per cent, and death from any health-related cause by 17 per cent.



Despite fears about the risk of mercury exposure, the most comprehensive study on eating fish to date recommends eating seafood twice a week to cut the risk of heart disease.

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In fact, the researchers say there is a health risk if people don't eat fish.

``Avoidance of modest fish consumption due to confusion regarding risks and benefits could result in thousands of excess CHD (coronary heart disease) deaths each year and suboptimal neurodevelopment in children," the Boston team writes in this week's *Journal of the American Medical Association*.

``Seafood is likely the single most important food one can consume for good health," said lead author Dr. Dariush Mozaffarian, an instructor in epidemiology at Harvard and in medicine at Boston's Brigham and Women's Hospital.

Overall, the benefits are greatest with fish high in omega-3 fatty acids, such as salmon, herrings and sardines, compared to lean fish _ cod, catfish and halibut.

In an interview, Mozaffarian said there is "good evidence" omega-3s benefit a baby's rapidly developing brain, but there's also some evidence mercury in large amounts may have a subtle, harmful effect on the developing brain.

To get the benefit of the omega-3s and minimize the risk of mercury, the researchers recommend pregnant women, women of childbearing age and young infants should consume up to two servings a week of a variety of seafood but avoid four species — shark, swordfish, king mackerel and golden bass, which is also known as tilefish — that have higher levels of mercury. Women who are or may become pregnant should also limit their intake of albacore tuna to six ounces per week, the study says.

The Institute of Medicine released similar recommendations Tuesday.

Mozaffarian says less than one-quarter of women of childbearing age eat enough fish.

He and co-author Eric Rimm reviewed the best studies they could find to get the most accurate estimate of the risks and benefits of fish.

For adults, they found a modest intake of fish — "enough to give you about two grams per week of EPA and DHA" — reduces the risk of a fatal heart attack or sudden death from cardiac disease, Mozaffarian said.

EPA and DHA are omega-3 fatty acids found exclusively in seafood.

They found no conclusive evidence mercury is harmful to adults at the levels of fish people typically eat.

As well, people who ate fried fish had a higher risk of heart attack, probably because fried fish from fast food restaurants or the frozen section at the supermarket contain lower levels of omega-3 fatty acids and higher amounts of trans fat.