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Americans Can Eat Fish Without Fear Of Mercury Poisoning

By JEANNE LESEM
UPI Food Editor

NEW YORK - A physician with 35 years' experience in toxicology and occupational diseases says Americans can eat fish without fear of mercury poisoning.

In an interview here, Dr. Leonard J. Goldwater, Chapel Hill, N.C., criticized what he called "instant experts" and press-inspired hysteria" in the controversy over mercury in food fish.

Published reports during recent months said the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has found excess levels of mercury in some canned tuna and in swordfish.

Both Dr. Goldwater and a Michigan physician who has made a study relating to the problem said the mercury levels reported were not dangerously high.

Dr. Goldwater added that mercury not only occurs naturally in all food, but that it has been used in medicine for centuries. "MERCURIAL diuretics for kidney disease patients are given in amounts many thousands of times greater than have been found in fish or other foods - often with lifesaving results," he said.

Dr. Goldwater is professor of community health sciences at Duke University, visiting professor of environmental sciences at the University of North Carolina, professor emeritus of occupational medicine at Columbia University and consultant to such varied groups as the World Health Organization, the Environmental Protection Agency, the fishing, canning and paint industries and mercury producers..

He said his interest in mercury poisoning dates from 1936, when he made a study of the hat industry in which the disease was then common. Its cause was traced to a mercury compound used in making felt.

Dr. Goldwater also said mercury poisoning from food has been rare through the centuries. He added that the relatively few cases on record involved persons who ate either a very unbalanced diet or food not intended for human consumption.

He described two as "very localized episodes" in Japan in which the victims were fishermen whose diets consisted almost solely of fish from waters highly contaminated by factory discharges of mercury.

He said several other episodes occurred in Iraq, Pakistan and Guatemala, when people ate treated grain they'd been given for planting only. He said some families escaped poisoning because they washed the grain before cooking it.

He said no cases of mercury poisoning as a result of eating fish ever have been suspected in the United States or Canada, although a Canadian researcher last year found methylmercury in fish taken from one of the Great Lakes and an American chemist recently found what he thought were abnormal amounts of mercury in a can of tuna.

In Washington, FDA commissioner Charles C. Edwards has said repeatedly that the U.S. supply of canned tuna is safe because those lots with excess mercury were recalled from the market and now are being screened out before distribution.

(The FDA also is policing swordfish and is continuing to recall any with high mercury content. FDA officials have said more than three-fourths of the swordfish they tested contained mercury above the agency's safe limit of 0.5 parts per million.)

The incidence of excess mercury in tuna was much less than in swordfish and, even when over the 0.5 parts per million level, was not high enough to be alarming, Edwards said. He said the safety level includes a margin for extra safety.)

"Fish, particularly marine fish - tend to have higher mercury value, It is normally present in the food chain, starting with algae that fish eat," Dr. Goldwater said.

"It's been going on since the beginning of time. In general, the bigger and older the fish, the more mercury, there is in it. This is also true for arsenic and several other elements."

He said a study by Dr. Thomas B. Eyl, St. Clair, Mich., found no cases of mercury poisoning among a large number of longtime moderate to heavy fish eaters who used fish from a lake known to be polluted with mercury.

Dr. Eyl's paper on the study appeared recently in the New England Journal of Medicine. It said many inconsistencies had been found in mercury analyses in North America. Dr. Eyl theorized that the estimated safe daily mercury intake for adults would not be exceeded even if an adult ate each day a seven-ounce can of tuna with mercury levels as high as that removed from the market by the FDA.