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Tuna, with a side of mercury

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Last month, scientists with the Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies Coalition issued a recommendation that expectant mothers eat more fish -- advice at odds with government advisories warning about the potential harm from exposure to methylmercury, a neurodevelopmental toxin.

The recommendation caused quite a stir. Several organizations in the Coalition publicly disavowed it, including the March of Dimes, the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The argument for eating fish during pregnancy is that omega-3 fatty acids in fish boost neurological development. But the methylmercury that now contaminates fish can irreversibly damage babies' developing nervous systems. That's why the Food and Drug Administration and the Environmental Protection Agency have issued a nationwide fish consumption advisory.

So let's summarize the experts' advice: Women should eat no more than 12 ounces of fish per week but at least 12 ounces of fish per week. They should eat less than 6 ounces per week of species that harbor relatively large amounts of methylmercury, such as albacore tuna, and less than 12 ounces of species that have lesser quantities of methylmercury, such as light tuna. And they should fill their plates and their children's lunch boxes with species that are relatively healthy, such as "salmon, tuna, sardines or mackerel."

It's no wonder the public is confused, and the public health message muddled.

Uncontaminated fish pose no dilemma. Fish are an exceptional source of protein and nutrients. Fish are also inexpensive: If one can dip a net or drop a line into nearby waters, one can feed a family without much money. And, for some, including members of the fishing tribes in the Pacific Northwest and elsewhere, fish are an indispensable component of community well-being and tribal identity.

It's maddening that the current debate gets framed as how to "balance" the "risks" and "benefits" of consuming fish, given mercury contamination. But mercury contamination ought not be considered a given. In fact, much could be done to address the underlying problem of mercury pollution but environmental agencies aren't doing it.

The Bush administration's "Clean Air Mercury Rule" is a case in point. Instead of requiring coal-fired utilities to reduce mercury emissions by roughly 90 percent before 2008, as authorized by the Clean Air Act, EPA asks polluters to "target" a 70 percent reduction by 2018. Even the EPA concedes this will leave many women and children "unprotected," and so directs them to the relevant fish consumption advisories.

This approach is all too common. In fact, environmental agencies have quietly worked to replace "risk reduction" with "risk avoidance." Rather than regulating the sources of pollution, "risk avoidance" shifts the burden to people whose practices or lifeways -- such as eating fish -- expose them to contaminants. This saves industry money but it places an unacceptable burden on vulnerable populations.

The other problem is that risk avoidance doesn't work. Fish consumption advisories are often

misinterpreted or ignored, or never reach those at risk. Such hurdles loom larger when those at risk don't speak the language in which advisories are written or lack the economic means to change their ways. Indeed, for members of fishing tribes, "avoiding" fish may be unthinkable.

Women and children shouldn't be saddled with such "choices." Tuna needn't come with a side of mercury, at least not if environmental agencies do their jobs.

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