

# FOR MORE INFORMATION

For more information about reducing your health risks from eating fish that contain chemical pollutants, contact your local or state health or environmental protection department. You can find the telephone number in the blue section of your local telephone directory.

You may also contact:

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency  
Office of Water  
Fish Contamination Program (4305)  
401 M Street, SW  
Washington, DC 20460

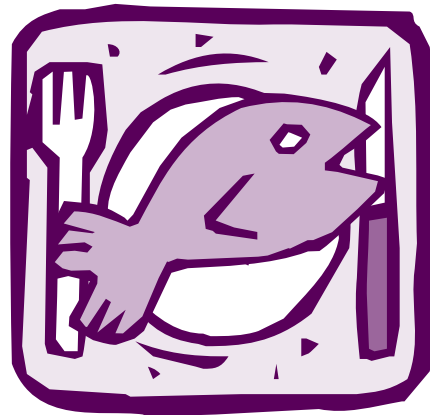
email address: [www.epa.gov/ost/fishadvice](http://www.epa.gov/ost/fishadvice)

United States  
Environmental Protection  
Agency  
Office of Science and Technology (4305)

EPA 823-B-97-009  
September 1997

## Should I Eat the Fish I Catch?

### A guide to healthy eating of the fish you catch



Developed in collaboration with the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, U.S. Public Health Service

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# INTRODUCTION

Fish are an important part of a healthy diet. They are a lean, low-calorie source of protein. Some sport fish caught in the nation's lakes, rivers, oceans, and estuaries, however, may contain chemicals that could pose health risks if these fish are eaten in large amounts.

The purpose of this brochure is not to discourage you from eating fish. It is intended as a guide to help you select and prepare fish that are low in chemical pollutants. By following these recommendations, you and your family can continue to enjoy the benefits of eating fish.

Fish taken from polluted waters might be hazardous to your health. Eating fish containing chemical pollutants may cause birth defects, liver damage, cancer, and other serious health problems.

Chemical pollutants in water come from many sources. They come from factories and sewage treatment plants that you can easily see. They also come from sources that you can't easily see, like chemical spills or runoff from city streets and farm fields. Pollutants are also carried long distances in the air.

Fish may be exposed to chemical pollutants in the water, and the food they eat. They may take up some of the pollutants into their bodies. The pollutants are found in the skin, fat, internal organs, and sometimes muscle tissue of the fish.

## *What can I do to reduce my health risks from eating fish containing chemical pollutants ?*

Following these steps can reduce your health risks from eating fish containing chemical pollutants. The rest of the brochure explains these recommendations in more detail.

- 1. Call your local or state environmental health department.** Contact them before you fish to see if any advisories are posted in areas where you want to fish.
- 2. Select certain kinds and sizes of fish for eating.** Younger fish contain fewer pollutants than older, larger fish. Panfish feed on insects and are less likely to build up pollutants.
- 3. Clean and cook your fish properly.** Proper cleaning and cooking techniques may reduce the levels of some chemical pollutants in the fish.



### Health Note

*Advisories are different from fishing restrictions or bans or limits. Advisories are issued to provide **recommendations** for limiting the amount of fish to be eaten due to levels of pollutants in the fish.*

# CATCHING FISH

## How can I find out if the waters that I fish in are polluted?

It's almost impossible to tell if a water body is polluted simply by looking at it. However, there are ways to find out.

*First*, look to see if warning signs are posted along the water's edge. If there are signs, follow the advice printed on them.

*Second*, even if you don't see warning signs, call your local or state health or environmental protection department and ask for their advice. Ask them if there are any advisories on the kinds or sizes of fish that may be eaten from the waters where you plan to fish. You can also ask about fishing advisories at local sporting goods or bait shops where fishing licenses are sold.

If the waterbody has not been tested, follow these guidelines to reduce your health risks from eating fish that might contain small amounts of chemical pollutants.



### Health Note

*Some chemical pollutants, such as mercury and PCBs, can pose greater risks to women of childbearing age, pregnant women, nursing mothers, and young children. This group should be especially careful to greatly reduce or avoid eating fish caught from polluted waters.*

## Do some fish contain more pollutants than others?

Yes. You can't look at fish and tell if they contain chemical pollutants. The only way to tell if fish contain harmful levels of chemical pollutants is to have them tested in a laboratory. Follow these simple guidelines to lower the risk to your family:

- If you eat gamefish, such as lake trout, salmon, walleye, and bass, eat the smaller, younger fish (within legal limits). They are less likely to contain harmful levels of pollutants than larger, older fish.
- Eat panfish, such as bluegill, perch, stream trout, and smelt. They feed on insects and other aquatic life and are less likely to contain high levels of harmful pollutants.
- Eat fewer fatty fish, such as lake trout, or fish that feed on the bottoms of lakes and streams such as catfish and carp. These fish are more likely to contain higher levels of chemical pollutants.

# CLEANING FISH

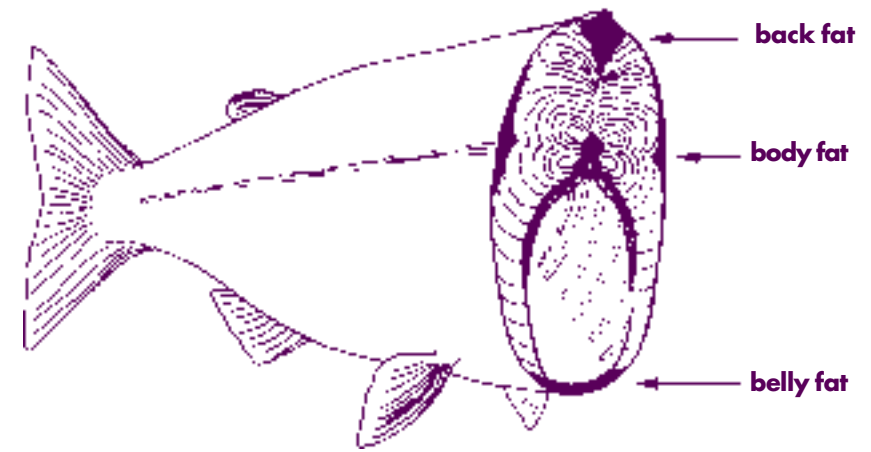
## Can I clean my fish to reduce the amount of chemical pollutants that might be present?

Yes. It's always a good idea to remove the skin, fat, and internal organs (where harmful pollutants are most likely to accumulate) before you cook the fish.

As an added precaution:

- Remove and throw away the head, guts, kidneys, and the liver.
- Fillet fish and cut away the fat and skin before you cook it.
- Clean and dress fish as soon as possible.

## Trim away the skin and fatty tissue before cooking to reduce the level of some pollutants in the fish you eat.



### Health Note

*Mercury is found throughout the tissue in fish, so these cleaning and cooking techniques will not reduce the amount of mercury in a meal of fish.*

Remember that with any fresh meat, always follow proper food handling and storage techniques. To prevent the growth of bacteria or viruses, keep freshly caught fish on ice and out of direct sunlight.

# COOKING FISH

## Can I cook my fish to reduce my health risk from eating fish containing chemical pollutants?

Yes. The way you cook fish can make a difference in the kinds and amounts of chemical pollutants remaining in the fish. Fish should be properly prepared and grilled, baked, or broiled. By letting

the fat drain away, you can remove pollutants stored in the fatty parts of the fish. Added precautions include:

- Avoid or reduce the amount of fish drippings or broth that you use to flavor the meal. These drippings may contain higher levels of pollutants.
- Eat less fried or deep fat-fried fish because frying seals any chemical pollutants that might be in the fish's fat into the portion that you will eat.
- If you like smoked fish, it is best to fillet the fish and remove the skin before the fish is smoked.

