Fish and shellfish are an important part of a healthy diet. Fish and shellfish contain high-quality protein and other essential nutrients, are low in saturated fat, and contain omega-3 fatty acids. A well-balanced diet that includes a variety of fish and shellfish can contribute to heart health and children’s proper growth and development. So, women and young children in particular should include fish or shellfish in their diets due to the many nutritional benefits.

However, nearly all fish and shellfish contain traces of mercury. For most people, the risk from mercury by eating fish and shellfish is not a health concern. Yet, some fish and shellfish contain higher levels of mercury that may harm an unborn baby or young child’s developing nervous system. The risks from mercury in fish and shellfish depend on the amount of fish and shellfish eaten and the levels of mercury in the fish and shellfish. Therefore, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) are advising women who may become pregnant, pregnant women, nursing mothers, and young children to avoid some types of fish and eat fish and shellfish that are lower in mercury.

For further information about the risks of mercury in fish and shellfish call the U.S. Food and Drug Administration’s food information line toll-free at 1-888-SAFEFOOD or visit FDA’s Food Safety website www.cfsan.fda.gov/seafood1.html.

For further information about the safety of locally caught fish and shellfish, visit the Environmental Protection Agency’s Fish Advisory website www.epa.gov/ost/fish or contact your State or Local Health Department. A list of state or local health department contacts is available at www.epa.gov/ost/fish. Click on Federal, State, and Tribal Contacts. For information on EPA’s actions to control mercury, visit EPA’s mercury website at www.epa.gov/mercury.
Frequently Asked Questions about Mercury in Fish and Shellfish:

What is mercury?
Mercury occurs naturally in the environment and can also be released into the air through industrial pollution. Mercury falls from the air and can accumulate in streams and oceans and is turned into methylmercury in the water. It is this type of mercury that can be harmful to your unborn baby and young child. Fish absorb the methylmercury as they feed in these waters and so it builds up in them. It builds up more in some types of fish than others, depending on what the fish eat, which is why the levels vary.

I'm a woman who could have children but I'm not pregnant - so why should I be concerned about methylmercury?
If you regularly eat types of fish that are high in methylmercury, it can accumulate in your blood stream over time. Methylmercury is removed from the body naturally, but it may take over a year for the levels to drop significantly. Thus, it may be present in a woman even before she becomes pregnant. This is the reason why women are trying to become pregnant should also avoid eating certain types of fish.

Is there methylmercury in all fish and shellfish?
Nearly all fish and shellfish contain traces of methylmercury. However, larger fish that have lived longer have the highest levels of methylmercury because they've had more time to accumulate it. These large fish (swordfish, shark, king mackerel and tilefish) pose the greatest risk. Other types of fish and shellfish may be eaten in the amounts recommended by FDA and EPA.

1. Do not eat:
   - Shark
   - Swordfish
   - King Mackerel
   - Tilefish
They contain high levels of mercury.

2. Eat up to 12 ounces (2 average meals) a week of a variety of fish and shellfish that are lower in mercury.
   - Five of the most commonly eaten fish that are low in mercury are shrimp, canned light tuna, salmon, pollock, and catfish.
   - Another commonly eaten fish, albacore (“white”) tuna has more mercury than canned light tuna. So, when choosing your two meals of fish and shellfish, you may eat up to 6 ounces (one average meal) of albacore tuna per week.

3. Check local advisories about the safety of fish caught by family and friends in your local lakes, rivers, and coastal areas.
   If no advice is available, eat up to 6 ounces (one average meal) per week of fish you catch from local waters, but don’t consume any other fish during that week.

Visit the Food and Drug Administration’s Food Safety Website www.cfsan.fda.gov or the Environmental Protection Agency’s Fish Advisory Website www.epa.gov/ost/fish for a listing of mercury levels in fish.