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What about PCB's in Fish?

There has been concern recently over the safety of eating freshwater fish caught in Lake Ontario, the Finger Lakes and connecting rivers because of contamination by PCB's. Lake Ontario salmon and trout do contain PCB's or polychlorinated biphenyls. Some fish contain levels up to five times higher than the regulations set by the Food and Drug Administration for the commercial sale of fish. However, the FDA has not set a definite ruling on the safety of eating PCB contaminated fish, as we are not sure how much humans can tolerate. Until a ruling is made, there are some simple steps in fish preparation that can lessen consumption of PCB's.

Correct Preparation and Cooking Can Eliminate Much of PCB.

Members of the salmon family, including trout, store up fat in certain parts of their body. PCB's are stored in the greatest concentration in the fat deposits. Locating and removing these areas is a way to eliminate a large portion of contaminants.

One fat area in salmon runs along the top (dorsal) fin line from head to tail. Roughly, it is V-shaped in form and measures up to one-half inch in depth on mature salmon. Studies have shown that it contains 20% fat. If the fish is to be filleted, cut off a strip up to 1/2 inch wide on either side of back fin. If the fish is to be cooked whole, make a V-shaped cut from head to tail while removing the top fin. Dispose of fat strip.

A second fat region is an area called the belly-flap. This is found in all fish. After the fish has been slit and gutted, remove 1/2 to 3/4 of an inch of flesh on each belly-flap from gills to anal opening before cooking.

A third layer of fat deposits in most fish is found in a thin layer just under the skin and over the entire body. Most of this fat will melt out if fish is skinned or the skin is pricked with sharp fork.

The last easily removable fat deposit is the darker flesh along the sides of the fish visible after skin has been removed. A shallow cut will remove most of the darker flesh without ruining steaks or fillets.

Steamed, baked or broiled fish can drain during cooking. As the fats melt out, PCB are carried away. Dishes should be avoided in which the fish cooks in its own jices, boiled or chowders. We are not recommending that any freshwater fish be canned.

Whether or not to eat fish from PCB contaminated waters remains a personal decision. Following the recommendations given will help minimize consumption of PCB's. New York State Department of Health is recommending that consumers limit their intake of PCB contaminated fish to one meal per week. Michigan and Wisconsin have also made this recommendation.

What Exactly Are PCB's?

PCB or Polychlorinated Biphenyls are a complex mixture of chemicals found in the environment. They are totally man made since the 1930's and found in water and air. High concentrations of PCB's accumulate in human fatty tissues, and is not eliminated. Large doses affect liver, skin, growth, reproduction and general health, but no one knows how much PCB can be tolerated.

Fresh water fish are the only concern at the present time. Tests show that United States and Canada have widespread accumulations in fish, animals and persons. Fat persons store more PCB's than thin persons.

Species having large amounts of PCB's are alewives, Northern Pike, smelt, eels, salmon, trout and Striped bass. (All species have some PCB, but the size, condition, age, fat content and species of fish influence the amount in each fish.)

Information from Sea Grant Advisory Service.

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