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Protecting Against PCB Contaminants

Some of our Great Lakes fishes -- chiefly coho and chinook salmon, lake trout, steelhead (rainbow trout) and brown trout -- have high levels of PCBs, pesticides and other contaminants in their flesh. Most other species, including perch, smallmouth and largemouth bass and smelt, contain much lower levels of these chemicals.

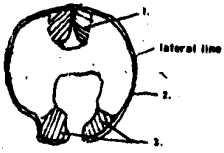
You can remove some of the contaminants as you clean and cook your catch by following tips taken from a Michigan State University Cooperative Extension Bulletin, "Getting Your Salmon Ready For Dinner" by Dr. Eugene F. Dice. It should be realized, however, that tests have shown that PCB levels in excess of federal Food and Drug Administration guidelines often remain, even after careful cleaning and cooking. The best way to protect yourself is to limit your consumption of Great Lakes salmon and trout.

CLEANING THE FISH

Remove all visible deposits of fat. High concentrations of fat are located:

1. Along the top (dorsal) fin line from the head to the tail. If the fish is filleted, this strip is usually left attached to the skeleton and is discarded.
2. In the belly-flap region.
3. Just under the skin over the entire body of the fish, especially along the lateral line. Much of this fat is removed by skinning, and some melts out during cooking.

Cross-section of Salmon Steak



COOKING THE FISH

Some fat and oil exists throughout the flesh of the fish.

Much of this melts out during cooking and carries with it some of the PCBs and other contaminants. Eating fish dishes which contain cooked body fluids or melted fats may be inadvisable. Included are home-made chowders, soups and home-canned salmon cooked in its own fluids. Steamed, baked or broiled fish should be thoroughly drained after cooking.

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