

MERCURY IN SEAFOOD

[SHOPPERS HAVE A RIGHT TO KNOW]



Mercury has made its way onto our dinner plates without our even knowing it. Largely because of polluting power plants, chlorine factories and other industries, mercury has infiltrated our rivers, lakes, and oceans. Consequently, many of the fish we commonly eat – like tuna and swordfish – contain such high concentrations of mercury that the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) consider them unsafe to eat on a frequent basis. According to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the primary source of mercury exposure in humans is through seafood consumption. In 2003, forty-five U.S. states issued mercury advisories for recreationally caught fish.

Mercury is a dangerous poison. Exposure to high concentrations has been linked to memory loss, fatigue, impaired coordination and other neurological damage. Mercury accumulates in the bloodstream over time and can remain in one's body for a year or more.

Children and unborn babies are especially at risk since they can be adversely affected by much lower levels of mercury than adults. Mercury can be passed on from a pregnant mother to her developing baby. In fact, a scientist with the EPA estimates that one in every six American women has enough mercury in her blood to run the risk of neurological damage to her developing child.

Women who are, or may become, pregnant, as well as children, should take special care to avoid fish with high mercury levels. In fact, the FDA and the EPA have warned women of child-bearing age and children not to eat swordfish, shark, king mackerel or tilefish, and to limit their consumption of all other fish to 12 ounces (about two average meals) a week, including no more than six ounces of albacore tuna or tuna steaks.

Unfortunately, neither of these agencies has done an adequate job of informing the public about their own advisories. Consumers are largely unaware of the FDA's warnings, and with the exception of those in California, grocery stores are not required to inform customers about the dangers of mercury contamination in seafood. As a result, consumers could be putting themselves and their families at risk.

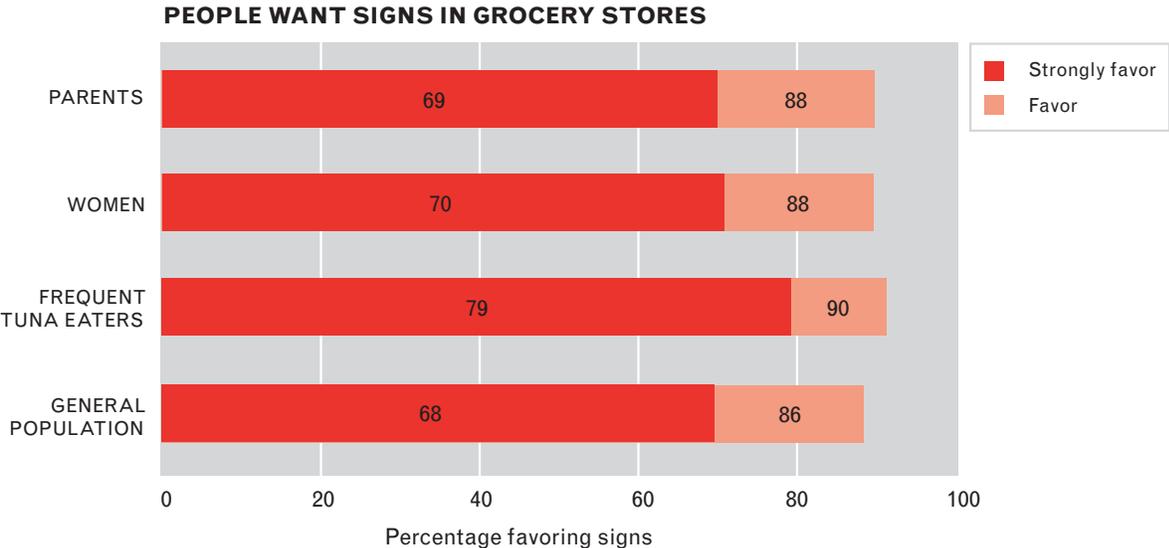
NATIONAL SURVEY REVEALS PEOPLE WANT TO KNOW

To assess the level of recognition among consumers about mercury contamination in seafood, as well as preferred solutions to the problem of mercury contamination, Oceana asked Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research to conduct a public opinion poll. In December, 2004, the firm conducted a telephone survey of 800 randomly-chosen respondents from all 50 states in the U.S.¹

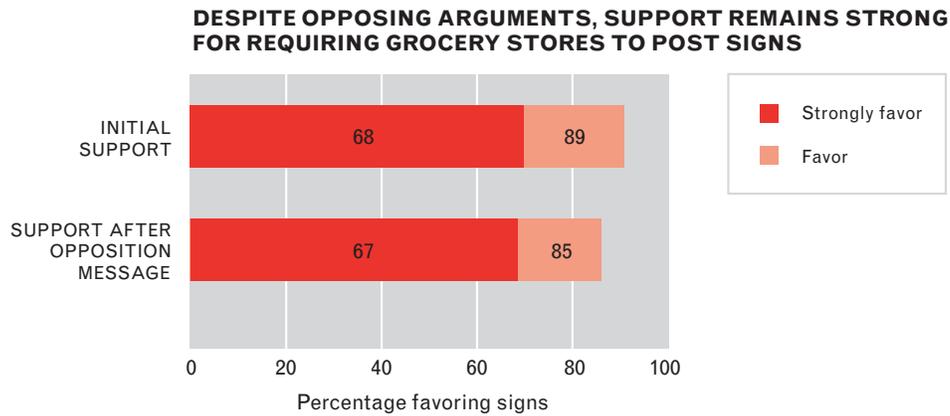
Oceana's survey shows that while consumers know little about mercury contamination in their seafood, they are eager to learn more about its potential dangers. People want to know which fish to avoid because of high levels of mercury. Support is strong and widespread for requiring grocery stores to post signs with government fish consumption advisories. This strong support exists across all age and racial groups, regions, and gender. Support for warning signs is also strong among those who do all or most of the shopping for their families, showing that the overall findings reflect the feelings of those that make purchasing decisions. Displaying signs is viewed as an obvious solution by a vast majority of respondents, and support remains strong even when respondents are given likely arguments against signs.

Findings:

- >> **The public knows very little about mercury contamination.** For example, only 34 percent of respondents indicate that contamination of fresh tuna and swordfish is a serious problem, despite the FDA advisory urging women of child-bearing age and children to consume no swordfish and to strictly limit consumption of albacore tuna and tuna steaks.
- >> **Consumers overwhelmingly want mercury warning signs in grocery stores to inform them of the dangers.** The vast majority of respondents support Oceana's proposal to require warning signs in grocery stores. Eighty-six percent of adults favor requiring signs, including 68 percent who **strongly** favor the proposal. This support is solid across subgroups and is high among those most affected by the FDA warnings – women, parents of children under 18, and frequent tuna consumers (those who eat tuna more than once a week).

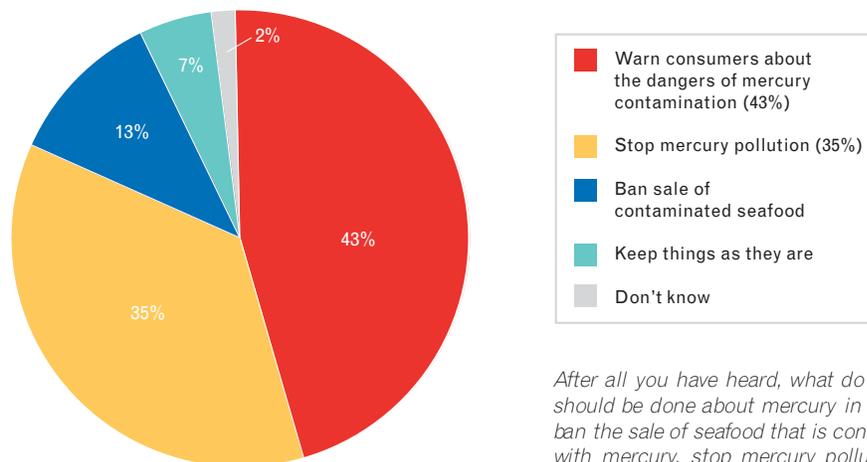


>> **Posting signs in grocery stores is a “no-brainer,” and support remains strong even after industry arguments.** Likely opposition arguments – 1) that prices would go up if signs were required, and 2) that signs are unnecessary – hold little sway with respondents. After hearing these arguments, 85 percent of adults still support requiring signs.



>> **Warning consumers is the public’s desired method of dealing with mercury contamination in seafood.** When asked to pick one method of handling the mercury contamination problem, the top choice among listed solutions is to inform consumers about the dangers of mercury contamination. Forty-three percent of respondents chose that option. Thirty-five percent of consumers support ending mercury pollution at the source. Most important for consumers, however, is having the information they need to better protect themselves and their families.

BEST WAY TO HANDLE MERCURY CONTAMINATION



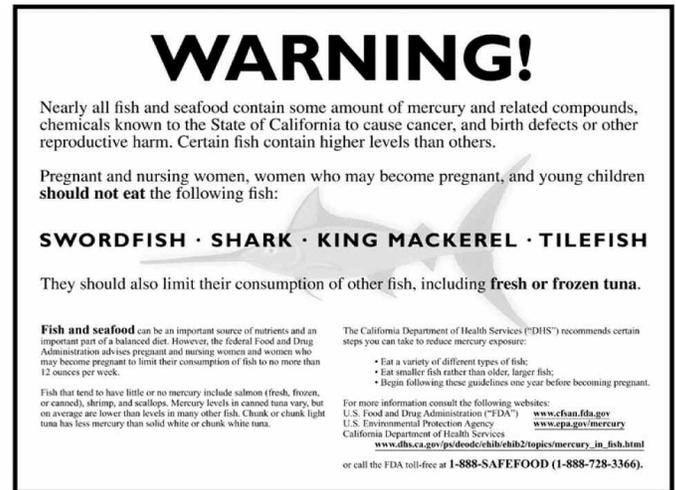
After all you have heard, what do you think should be done about mercury in seafood – ban the sale of seafood that is contaminated with mercury, stop mercury pollution from the major sources, warn consumers about the dangers of mercury contamination where they buy their food, or keep things as they are?

A SIMPLE, ACHIEVABLE SOLUTION

Posting mercury warning signs in grocery stores informs consumers. Consumers want to have the information needed to make smart choices for their family's health. When asked what they would do if they saw signs in their grocery stores, 65 percent of respondents say they would still buy fish. Twenty-seven percent say they would purchase the fish they originally wanted. On the other hand, 38 percent say they would buy an alternative type of fish with lower mercury concentrations. Of the remaining respondents, it is unclear whether they were fish buyers that were turned off by the signs, or whether they were not fish buyers to begin with.

Oceana makes the following recommendations:

- >> Grocery stores should develop and implement company-wide policies to post clear warning signs, similar to those required in California, wherever fish with FDA advisories, including canned albacore tuna, tuna steaks and swordfish, are sold.
- >> The FDA should require such signs to be posted so customers can make informed decisions.
- >> Consumers should ask their grocers to post signs to inform them and their fellow customers.



WARNING SIGN FROM THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA

The FDA mercury contamination advisory says that women of child-bearing age and children should not eat certain types of fish and should limit consumption of others. Yet most people are unaware of this warning. Shoppers should not have to guess which fish are safe to eat. There are a variety of choices in supermarkets, and only a few have mercury levels that trigger government warnings. People can still eat fish without worrying about unhealthy mercury levels, but to do so they need better information. Consumers have a right to know what is in their food, so they may choose what is best for their health and the health of their families, and they overwhelmingly favor requiring mercury warning signs in grocery stores.

¹ The results had a sampling margin of error of plus or minus 3.5 percentage points.

Sources:

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