

Consumer tip for pregnant and breastfeeding women to restrict their consumption of tuna fish is still valid

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Fish contains important nutrients. The German Nutrition Society (DGE) therefore recommends eating fish once or twice a week. However, the organic form of mercury, methyl mercury, can accumulate in fish via the marine food chain. Some older predatory fish may, therefore, have elevated levels of methyl mercury. For these fish a maximum level of 1 milligram of mercury per kilogram fish weight applies across Europe. For species of fish, which do not show any elevated methyl mercury levels, a maximum level of 0.5 mg/kg applies. When these maximum levels are complied with, and this is monitored by the food control authorities, no health risk is to be expected for the general population based on normal eating habits.

In the foetus and infant methyl mercury can lead to neuronal embryopathies as it can cross the blood-brain barrier and placenta. Hence pregnant and breastfeeding women, fetuses and neonates are deemed to be a particularly sensitive risk group when the mothers regularly eat certain fish or larger amounts of certain fish. For that reason the Federal Institute for Risk Assessment (BfR) and the Federal Ministry of the Environment (BMU) have advised pregnant and breastfeeding women for several years now to refrain from eating fish which may potentially have higher contamination levels of methyl mercury. This includes tuna. As there are indications that tins of tuna in Germany currently have mean mercury levels which are far lower than the admissible maximum level of 1 mg/kg mercury, BfR once again examined whether the consumer tip is still justified for tuna and products. To this end, the Institute evaluated the data on mercury content in tuna and tuna products from food control for the years 2000-2008. It comes to the conclusion that tins of "tuna in its own juice" may also have mercury levels in individual cases which are close to the maximum levels of 1 milligram per kilogram. Hence BfR upholds its recommendation that pregnant and breastfeeding women should restrict their consumption of tuna for precautionary reasons.

The full version of this BfR Opinion is available in German on http://www.bfr.bund.de/cm/208/verbrauchertipp_fuer_schwangere_und_stillende_den_verzehr_von_thunfisch_einzuschraenken.pdf