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Division of Teaching and Learning Programs and Services
Bureau of Health and Nutrition Services and Child/Family/School Partnerships
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OPERATIONAL MEMORANDUM

TO: Child and Adult Care Food Program Sponsors

FROM: Maureen B. Staggenborg, Director
Child Nutrition Programs

DATE: May 26, 2004

SUBJECT: **Operational Memorandum #13C-04, 12A-04 and 13H-04
Advisory on Methylmercury in Fish**

On March 19, 2004, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) announced their joint consumer advisory on methylmercury in fish and shellfish for women who may become pregnant, pregnant women, nursing mothers, and young children. This unifies advice from both the FDA and EPA and supersedes the FDA's and EPA's 2001 advisories. The Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) relies on the recommendations of the FDA in matters pertaining to the safety of commercially available food.

Recommendations of the Advisory

The purpose of the revised FDA/EPA advisory is to inform women and the parents of young children on how to get the positive health benefits from eating fish and shellfish, while minimizing their mercury exposure. The advisory is significant because it is the first time the FDA and EPA have combined their advice into a single uniform advisory. Previously the FDA issued an advisory on the consumption of commercially caught fish, while the EPA issued advice on recreationally caught fish. The FDA and EPA revised their existing advisories as a result of recommendations the FDA received from its Food Advisory Committee.

The revised advisory contains three recommendations for women who might become pregnant, women who are pregnant, nursing mothers, and young children:

1. Do not eat shark, swordfish, king mackerel, or tilefish because 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 six ounces (one average meal) of albacore tuna per week.

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3. Check local advisories about the safety of fish caught by family and friends in your local lakes, rivers, and coastal areas. If no advisories exist, eat up to six ounces (one average meal) per week of fish you catch from local waters, but don't consume any other fish during that week.
4. Follow the same recommendations when feeding fish and shellfish to your young child, but serve smaller portions.

The Difference Between This Advisory and Previous Advisories

The following highlights the difference between this advisory and previous advisories:

- The advisory emphasizes the positive benefits of eating fish;
- The advisory provides examples of commonly eaten fish that are low in mercury;
- The advisory for the first time specifically addresses canned light tuna and canned albacore (“white”) tuna as well as tuna steaks (in the questions and answers section);
- The advisory recommends not eating any other fish in the same week as locally caught fish are consumed (the advice on the amount of locally caught fish to eat is the same as in the 2001 EPA advisory); and
- The advisory contains a section that addresses frequently asked questions about mercury in fish.

As part of announcing the revised consumer advisory, the FDA and EPA plan to launch a comprehensive outreach and educational campaign to complement the release of the advisory. We are including links to the FDA/EPA advisory, which includes frequently asked questions; a press release announcing the advisory; and an FDA Backgrounder that provides information on its development.

1) Press Release: <http://www.fda.gov/bbs/topics/news/2004/NEW01038.html>

(2) Advisory:
<http://www.cfsan.fda.gov/~dms/admehg3.html>

(3) Backgrounder:
<http://www.fda.gov/oc/opacom/hottopics/mercury/backgrounder.html>