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The Skinny on Seafood Fish: risk vs benefit

While the health benefits of eating seafood have been well-documented for quite some time, more and more evidence is questioning the safety and sustainability of eating some types of fish. I know, sometimes it seems like we can't feel good about eating *anything* anymore. But don't worry, I'm not going to tell you to swear off fish for life—most experts still agree that the benefits far outweigh the risks.

So what are the benefits? To start with, fish is a great source of lean protein and many are also high in vitamin D. While the typical American diet includes plenty of protein, vitamin D is another story. Experts agree that most of us are not getting enough vitamin D—especially in the winter months. Fish also contain omega-3 fatty acids that are important for reducing risk of cardiovascular disease in adults and also help with brain development in infants. In fact, consuming fish has been linked to a lower risk of heart disease, stroke, depression, and mental decline with age. Not bad, huh?

As stated earlier, however, it's not all good news. Fish are not immune to the pollutants in our environment, and many fish are bringing some not-so-nice guests to the dinner table. Contaminants like heavy metals (mercury), chemicals (PCB's), and pesticides (DDT) are all showing up in certain types of fish. In addition, some types of fish may not be sustainably sourced, meaning that we are fishing in ways that are harmful to the environment, or taking them faster than they can naturally replenish.

So how do we know which fish to eat, and which to avoid? Well, there are several sources on the internet to help guide your decision. I personally like the guide put together by the Monterey Bay Aquarium (www.seafoodwatch.org). It has a handy green-, yellow-, and red-category guide to help identify fish that are best choices, good alternatives, and those we should avoid. In addition, a new 'Super-Green' category identifies fish that are low in contaminants and good sources of omega-3 fatty acids. Wild-caught Alaskan salmon (a favorite of mine) made this list—try grilling it on a cedar plank for an exciting flavor combination. FYI—soaking the plank for at least an hour first helps to avoid unnecessary visits from the local fire department.

Fish can still be a healthy and responsible choice for your next meal, and no matter what fish you choose I hope this helps to make your decision an informed one. *Kentz Willis, M.S., is the University Extension Educator in Nutrition and Food Safety for Sheridan and Johnson counties. He can be reached via email at kwillis3@uwyo.edu.*