EVERYBODY'S TALKING

Falling on the Swordfish

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If I seem a little grumpy today, it’s because I am concerned about not getting my recommended daily allowance of Omega-3 fatty acids, which according to all studies are good for you in some way or another.

It’s those fish advisories – the ones from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and some state public health authorities that have all those scary warnings about fish and mercury. About how I shouldn’t eat this fish or that fish or eat more of this fish and less of that fish because of elevated mercury levels. They’re driving me crazy with worry.

I take warnings seriously when the government is behind them. I never use my hair dryer in the shower and I look both ways before crossing a street. And I am always at the highest level of alert for suspicious activities.

Because they hit me in a vulnerable spot – my stomach – food advisories especially get my attention. The first few paragraphs of the latest fish advisories mentioning mercury upset me most, since, like most people I only read the beginning and not the “qualification” statements at the end. When faced with a complicated choice at a restaurant (eat this fish two times per week, but not this fish unless you aren’t pregnant then you can eat this fish, unless…), I avoid all fish and go for the lamb chops every time.

And that’s too bad. Fish, in addition to being a good source of those unfortunately named but good for you Omega-3 fatty acids (appetizing!), are low in saturated fat, high in protein and generally moderately priced. In addition, the lifecycle of wild fish puts almost no strain on environmental resources. So that’s good.

But I’m scared. So I avoid. But if I took the time to read the entire advisories and not just focus on the worst parts, I would come to a few simple conclusions that would moderate my fear.

First, the advisories don’t even apply to me or to any member of my family (wife, two sons), so my family and I can eat reasonable amounts of fish with impunity.

Second, they only apply to a very narrow segment of the population, a very sensitive group in fact, for which lots of other warnings also apply. And not even forever, just for those years when a person is most vulnerable. Third, except for people who subsist entirely on freshwater fish, the excluded fish are not exactly staples of most diets, making abstinence a little easier – kind of like giving up lima beans or asparagus. And, of course, there are huge safety factors, so a fish or two isn’t going to really cause any harm. As warnings or diet changes go, this shouldn’t be a huge burden.

Now, of course, this does not mean in any way that mercury indiscriminately released by power plants, primarily in China or other countries in violation of common sense should not be stopped pronto. International and out of state emitters are the primary sources of mercury in the lakes of the Northeast. Nor does it mean the warning is a bad idea. Mercury is in fish as a result of hundreds of years of deposition. A lot of it is natural (volcanoes, fires); some of it is because of man’s activities. And it will take perhaps hundreds of years to change that. In fact, some believe that natural mercury released may be enough, by itself, to always and forever render certain fish unsafe to eat for sensitive populations, especially as we become more able to measure smaller levels of mercury. We can argue about whether the standard is too high or too low, or whether there should be a standard at all, but the bottom line is we have to live with the fish advisory. The goal at this point should be to comfort people’s fears, not inflame them.

Basically the warning affects three groups of people: Pregnant and nursing women, women of childbearing age, and children under 12. This is primarily due to mercury’s harmful effect on the developing nervous system in the young and unborn. If you aren’t in that group, don’t worry too much.

Then it only applies to a few fish species: all freshwater fish (but it does not apply to stocked trout, salmon or any other stocked fish, nor does it apply to farmed freshwater fish), and the marine species of shark, tilefish, king
mackerel, and swordfish. Tuna has a separate warning, which allows eating moderate amounts of albacore (white) but suggests that light tuna is better – in fact, the EPA says a person can eat up to six ounces of tuna steak per week.

That’s it. Now don’t you feel better already? Sure, the all-swordfish diet you were thinking about trying would not be wise, but any person can safely eat moderate amounts of thousands of other fish species, including shellfish.

As for the children, let me pose this question: Do lots of children under 12 eat shark, king mackerel, or tilefish? Maybe a little swordfish once in a while, but I think that would still be pretty rare. Sure, kids like tuna, but you only have to limit tuna to two meals per week. And two meals per week of tuna seems like a lot, or at least enough. So for kids the advisory is a moderate annoyance and one that, like lots of warnings, is manageable.

Pregnant and nursing women? Let’s state the obvious. This is the most sensitive population possible. Doctors’ offices are full of dos and don’ts for pregnant or breastfeeding women. This warning is but one on a long list. Alcohol, coffee, aspirin or over the counter medication, most prescription medications, undercooked meat or fish or unpasteurized milk or cheeses are off limits as are x-rays or even routine dental care, hair dyes or cleaning the kitty litter box. And this list does not even include obvious activities that should be avoided, like skydiving or bungee jumping. During this time, no warning is excessive. Every possible warning should be heeded as much as possible, even those with large safety factors. The fish warning is another important warning (and partners should be supportive by not eating the fish mentioned in the advisories).

Finally, the warning applies to women of “childbearing” age, an age that is likely to be in the 18-45 year range. But even this warning is not as bad as it first seems. First, there are many women that will not, for whatever reason, have children. They can eat the fish. Second, once a woman decides not to have more children, she is able to eat the fish. Finally, in my experience, most women are through their childbearing ages in about a ten-year period (a period which overlaps the pregnancy period mentioned above). Considering all the warnings that surround us, unless your goal in life is absolute compliance with every warning ever written, this is one that should not crimp an active and variety-filled lifestyle.

Of course, in all these cases, you have to actually like the fish being limited – maybe not an easy hurdle for some people when referring to shark, tilefish or king mackerel.

Moderation and diversity are key, even for fish that are low in mercury. The advisory says that one should eat a variety of fish and balance the ones higher in mercury with the ones lower in mercury. Members of any of the sensitive populations should not overdue their consumption of shark, tilefish, swordfish, king mackerel or tuna any more than a person who has a heart or cholesterol problem should overdue their consumption of bacon, steak and french fries. If freshwater fish is your thing, catch and eat the fish from a lake or pond where the fish are stocked – there are lots of them in Massachusetts, for example. But remember there are huge safety factors built into this warning, so strict compliance with this warning need not be an all-consuming passion.

Here’s a short list of fish that are not covered by the advisory: any stocked or farm raised freshwater fish, haddock, lobster, crab, clams, cod, salmon, flounder, eel, halibut, shrimp, pollock, herring, wolffish, hake and dolphin (that’s dolphin, as in dolphin fish, not Flipper).

Society will survive if sensitive populations limit the consumption of the fish covered by the advisory during the period of time they are vulnerable, as society has survived complying with numerous other cautions and warning related to almost everything we do. Those of us who live rationally and who understand risks will prosper – others will worry themselves sick about an inability to eat every last species of fish whenever they want, even those they never had any desire to eat in the first place. No one should starve because of this – plenty of people have to limit their intake of certain foods (often throughout their entire lives) due to dietary restrictions because of allergies or medical or religious reasons. Really, this is not different.

Reading about these warnings and the subsequent overreaction to them, I am reminded of the 60s television show Lost in Space. When faced with a terrible situation, the robot on the show would begin to flail his arms wildly up and down, his head would begin spinning and the words, “Warning, Warning” would be repeated.

Invariably, after a few seconds of this nonsense, Dr. Zachary Smith, the stowaway would approach the robot, call him a “Bumbling Bucket of Bolts” and pull out the robot’s power pack, causing him to keel over and slump.

I feel the same way. You show me the power pack on these robots that repeatedly get people worried sick about simple, manageable warnings and I’ll disconnect them.

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