

Why should I eat fish?

Fish is good for your health. It is an excellent source of protein, vitamins, and minerals. It is low in “bad” (saturated) fat and cholesterol, but high in “good” fat (omega-3 fatty acids). Eating fish at least twice a week can help control weight and prevent diabetes. Also, fishing keeps people active and reinforces family ties. It is an important Cree tradition.

Why should I care about mercury in fish?

Most fish contain some mercury. Some comes from the rocks of Northern Québec. When a dam puts new areas of land underwater, the fish may take in more mercury than before. And it can take over 30 years for the mercury levels of fish in reservoirs to go back down. Tiny amounts of mercury do no harm, but larger amounts can affect our brains. Babies growing in their mother’s womb are at special risk. Their brains are more sensitive to mercury than the brains of older children or adults.

What should I do?

Cook fish by boiling, smoking, or baking it, and enjoy it often. But do try to eat mostly low-mercury fish.

Low-mercury fish include sturgeon, lake whitefish, cisco, sucker, and speckled trout. These fish have less mercury because they eat plants and insects rather than other fish. Coastal fish (ones caught in salt water) also have less mercury.

High-mercury fish include

- Fish that eat other fish, like pike, walleye, lake trout, or burbot. If you eat these kinds of fish, try to choose the smaller ones (those less than 1½ feet or 50 cm). The smaller ones have less mercury.
- Fish that live in reservoirs. (If the reservoirs have been there for many years, the risk is lower.)
- Fish that live directly downstream from electric power plants (i.e., within 2–3 km).

If you are pregnant or nursing

If you are pregnant or nursing a child, you need to be extra careful about mercury. The Cree Health Board recommends that you eat around two meals of low-mercury fish per week. Try to avoid high-mercury fish like pike, walleye, lake trout, and burbot. If you do eat these kinds, choose the smaller fish.

Good News

Mercury levels in the La Grande reservoirs are going back down. Mercury is almost at pre-dam levels in fish that eat plants and insects (like whitefish). But it is still higher than usual in fish that eat other fish (pike, walleye, and lake trout). These kinds of fish should be eaten less often.

For more information, visit our website at creehealth.org, or call Reggie Tomatuk, Environmental Health Officer, at 819-855-9001 ext. 5363.