

Fear of Fish: The Contaminant Controversy

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Lab technician Chris McAllister is preparing a coho salmon, but not for any recipe I want to try. First, with gloved hands, she slices a slim, sharp knife close to skin and bone, filleting and skinning the 10-pound fish with care. Then she dumps it into a commercial-strength food grinder, reducing the silver salmon to a creamy pink paste that she scoops into small jars.

If this coho is typical, that fish goo—though unappetizing—is still full of mostly good stuff, including omega-3 fatty acids, antioxidants, and vitamin D. The typical coho is about 27 percent protein, 7 percent fat, and less than 0.0000027 percent methyl mercury—which, for the organic contaminants research being carried out here by the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation, is about the only fraction of this fish that scientists are interested in.

The study, the most comprehensive look ever at heavy metals and contaminants in Alaska's fish, is a response to public fears over seafood, particularly salmon. The pot has been stirred to a boil recently by the findings of several scientific studies. What the public is being advised to do is obscured by the debate between farmed and wild salmon industries.

The research is of interest well beyond the state's borders: Alaska's commercial fisheries supply more than 50 percent of the commercially sold wild fish consumed in the United States—and nearly all of its wild-caught salmon.

Scary salmon stories

Salmon has long been recognized as a wonder food—with maybe the biggest wonder being why Americans don't eat more of it. Low in saturated fat and high

in omega-3 fatty acids, salmon, eaten a couple of times a week, has been found to reduce the risk of heart attacks, lower blood pressure, and improve arterial health.

"It actually has so many benefits you could almost characterize it with drugs," says nutritionist Charles Santerre, associate professor of the Department of Foods and Nutrition at Purdue University. "There's not many foods that have this many benefits." Nonetheless, the average American still consumes only about two pounds of salmon, or just over five standard servings, per year. And lately, the most widely publicized salmon news has focused less on what's good about it and more on what might be bad:

- An 18 September 2003 study published in the journal *Nature* reported that wild salmon transport polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), a group of synthetic industrial chemicals identified as probable human carcinogens, from the ocean to Alaska lakes. Though the production and import of PCBs has been banned in the United States since 1977, PCBs are still present in older devices and have been found to persist in the environment and migrate toward Earth's poles, where they accumulate in the fat of fish and marine mammals. According to the study, a million spawning salmon move an amount of PCBs "comparable to the amount of fugitive PCBs released annually



At the State of Alaska Environmental Health Laboratory in Palmer, Alaska, lab technician Chris McAllister fillets a coho (silver) salmon in preparation for contaminants testing. The testing, by Alaska's Department of Environmental Conservation, is the most comprehensive look ever at contaminants in Alaska's fish. Alaska's commercial fishing industry supplies more than half of all fish consumed in the United States.

*Photograph: Sonya Senkowsky/
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