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Health benefits of eating fish outweigh risks

BY JOHN CONNELLY

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It would be easy if we could label all things -- or all foods -- "good" or "bad," but we all know it's not that simple. As any dietitian will tell you, a healthy diet is about balancing the foods you eat.

Incredibly, one popular food that some want to put in the "bad" category is fish because it contains trace levels of mercury, which occurs naturally in the ecosystem. While pregnant women need to monitor what foods they consume, mercury intake can be managed, and the federal government provides guidelines for them.

But some would still have you believe our mothers were wrong: Fish isn't brain food or good for your health.

While a sensational headline such as that might sell newspapers, it doesn't help Chicagoans figure out what to serve to their families. The fact is, our mothers were teaching us good nutritional habits, and there are scientific data to prove it.

While trace amounts of mercury can be found in a few types of seafood, many research studies have examined the risk vs. benefits of fish consumption. These studies continue to prove that the health benefits of eating fish far outweigh any potential risk from such minimal exposure to mercury.

In October, a study from the Harvard Center for Risk Analysis confirmed that eating less fish and seafood to prevent mercury exposure is not justified when weighed against the loss of omega-3 fatty acids in the diet. The analysis found that for men and women, decreased fish consumption leads to an increased incidence of stroke and coronary heart disease.

Other scientific evidence shows those same omega-3 fatty acids -- some of which can be gained only by eating fish -- can reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease. In its 2005 Dietary Guidelines, the federal government advises Americans to consume more fish to live "longer, healthier and more active lives." The new food pyramid design bases its recommendations on the Dietary Guidelines. Those guidelines, created by nutrition experts at the U.S. Department of Agriculture, specifically mention the tremendous health benefits of fish and shellfish such as the omega-3 fatty acids that can "reduce the risk of mortality from cardiovascular disease."

The evidence that fish is heart-healthy is echoed by the American Heart Association. According to AHA, "Healthy people should eat omega-3 fatty acids from fish to protect their hearts. For middle-aged and older men, and postmenopausal women, the benefits of eating fish far outweigh the risks within the established guidelines."

And back to Mom telling us to eat our "brain food." During developmental stages of a pregnancy and in the first few years of a child's growth, the positive effects of omega-3 fatty acids consumed before birth and as an infant contribute to positive growth of a child's brain. The most recent proof of that comes from a study published last year in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine, which found omega-3 intake may have a positive influence on a child's IQ.

But what Mom didn't know is that we need to continue eating fish throughout life to maintain neurological health. The Rush Institute for Healthy Aging actually found weekly consumption of fish with omega-3s may reduce the risk of Alzheimer's disease.

So fish remains in the "good-for-you" food category -- from the womb to the cradle, to middle age to retirement.

As an industry, we are educating consumers about how and why we should include seafood as part of a balanced, healthy diet. We recently launched www.AboutSeafood.com to help Americans learn more about fish, including information to help expecting mothers make smart choices about seafood consumption during their pregnancies.

As the vast array of scientific evidence suggests, a balanced diet that includes a variety of seafood outweighs the risks associated with limited mercury exposure. And for women of childbearing age, it's important to follow the advice outlined by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency: Women and young children need to keep fish in their diets for optimal health, so read the mercury advisory carefully and follow those recommendations.

John Connelly is president of the National Fisheries Institute.