



2007 Baseline Study – Mercury in Fish

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Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

This executive summary presents the key findings from a baseline quantitative study conducted to assess Canadians' knowledge, attitudes and behaviours with regards to the consumption of fish, with special attention to the role possible mercury content may play.

Data for this survey were collected using teleVox, Decima's national omnibus survey. A total of 2,106 surveys were completed – 1,628 in English and 478 in French – between January 25th through and February 5th, using CATI (Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing). The approximate margin of error for a random probability sample of this size is $\pm 2.1\%$ at the 95% confidence level.

Background and Objectives

As of late, Health Canada has taken a number of initiatives to inform the Canadian public about the risks associated with the relationship of fish consumption and the effects of mercury. Market research was initiated to help determine Canadians' awareness of this relationship. This information will allow Health Canada to better target awareness initiatives and further the understanding of the Canadian public contributing to a healthier citizenry.

Specifically this research had two key objectives:

- Establish a baseline of knowledge upon which the effectiveness of any communications will later be judged.
- Aid in development and dissemination of communications initiatives.

Key Findings

The following represent the key findings of this survey:

- Most Canadians surveyed (80%) said they eat fish in at least one meal every week, including 20% who indicated eating fish three or more times per week. More than one quarter (27%) of Canadians living in coastal provinces (Atlantic Canada and B.C.) indicated being more likely to be eating fish three or more times per week.
- The majority of Canadians (64%) said their and their household's consumption of fish is about the same as it has been in the past, but

for those households where there has been a change, it is more than twice as likely to have increased (25%) rather than decreased (9%).

- Asked why they are doing so, the 9% of Canadians who described themselves and their households as consuming less fish were citing reasons such as taste (28%), cost (15%) and availability (13%) more often than reasons related to mercury levels (9%).
- Those respondents whose households were eating more fish than in the past (25%) were far more likely to say it had to do with health reasons (68%) than any other reason.
- Fully one out of three (32%) could offer no answer on how many servings of fish experts recommend a person should eat each week, while almost half of respondents said the advice is to eat either two (21%) or three (26%) servings each week.
- More than two-thirds (71%) claimed to recall seeing or hearing something on the news or in the media about concerns related to mercury levels in fish or seafood products. Of these people, the vast majority (80%) say the mercury levels in fish were at least something of a concern to them.
- One in five Canadians (21%) claimed they have heard any advisory information in regard to the consumption of fish or seafood from either Health Canada or a health professional, including 16% who claimed to have heard it specifically from Health Canada.
- Those in Quebec (21%), Francophone respondents (21%), women (21%) and those aged 50 and older (20%) were all more likely to say they had heard any advisory information in regard to the consumption of fish or seafood from Health Canada. Those living west of Ontario (14%), those aged 19-24 (7%), and Anglophones (16%) were all less likely to say they had heard any advisory information in regard to the consumption of fish or seafood from Health Canada specifically.
- Those with recall of any advisory information from either Health Canada or a health professional (21%) were asked whether this advisory was about the consumption of all fish or certain types of fish, with two-thirds (67%) saying it was about specific types of fish and of this smaller group who said it was pertaining to specific types of fish, 35% accurately named one of the species named in the advisory (tuna, shark, swordfish, escolar, marlin or orange roughy). Taken together, among those who recalled any advisory from Health Canada or a health professional, 23% were able to accurately identify at least one of the specific species involved.
- Those who claimed to have heard about the advisory through either Health Canada or a health professional were relatively divided in their responses with 50% saying it applied to all and 39% saying it applied to certain groups within the population. Those who felt it applied to

certain groups identified pregnant women and children as the specific groups mentioned far more often than any other responses offered.

- In terms of the nature of the instructions they retained from their exposure to the advisory, the majority of those who said they had heard about it through Health Canada or a health professional said that the information suggested limiting the consumption of certain kinds of fish (59%) rather than stopping the consumption of certain kinds of fish (10%), limiting the consumption of all types of fish (12%) or stopping the consumption of all fish altogether (3%).
- One in five Canadians surveyed (20%) claimed to recall the particular advisory information when it was described to them as: *“most Canadians don’t need to be concerned about mercury exposure as a result of fish consumption, because the types of fish that are most popular in Canada are relatively low in mercury. However, there are some types of fish that, if eaten too frequently, particularly by certain at-risk groups in society, could result in exposure to an unacceptable amount of mercury...”* Ontario respondents (17%) were least likely to say they recalled the message, while those from B.C. (22%) were slightly most likely. Women who said they are neither pregnant nor intending to become pregnant (22%) were slightly more likely than men to recall the advisory (17%). The sample is quite small (n=62), but 26% of the women that were pregnant or planning to become pregnant claimed to recall the advisory as described. Those aged 18-24 years old were less likely than all other age groups to say they recall the advisory (12%).
- Compared to five other information sources tested, Health Canada had the highest proportion of Canadians rating it as credible on the issue of fish or seafood consumption, with two out of three Canadians surveyed (68%) saying they consider Health Canada to be either extremely credible (37%) or somewhat credible (31%).
- Compared to four other methods of communicating, information on product packages was most widely considered to be a method that respondents felt they would notice, with 80% of Canadians saying they would either be very likely (41%) or somewhat likely (39%) to take notice and read information presented in this manner.