salmon: to eat or not to eat?

Should you cross farm-raised salmon off your shopping list? We take a closer look.

BY KERRI CONAN

MOST SALMON fans have no doubt spent the past year swimming upstream against a wave of confusing information. One day, salmon was a wonder food rich in healthy omega-3 fatty acids, high in protein, readily available, and easy to dress up or down in the kitchen. Then, suddenly the tide shifted. Two high-profile studies suggested that farmed salmon—the kind at most grocery stores and on most restaurant menus—contained higher levels of cancer-causing polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) than salmon caught in the wild.

So what's the health-conscious fishophile to do? Troll the markets for harder-to-find, more-expensive wild salmon? Commit to a life of nothing but boneless chicken breasts? Not so fast. There are two sides to every story—even one that seems as clear-cut as this fish tale.

First, it's important to note that neither the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) nor the World Health Organization (WHO) has advocated avoiding farm-raised salmon. But the researchers behind one of last year’s studies, published in the journal Science, used PCB-tolerance numbers from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to conclude that people should eat only one 8-ounce serving of most farmed salmon per month because the risks “might detract from the beneficial effects of fish consumption.” (The FDA, not the EPA, is responsible for regulating the seafood bought in supermarkets and restaurants.) The American Heart Association, meanwhile, continues to recommend two 3-ounce servings of fatty fish (read: salmon) per week. You see the problem.

The U.S. government banned PCBs back in 1979, but their residues continue to linger in the environment. The chemicals are classified as “probable human carcinogens,” but whether they actually cause cancer in individuals isn’t known. And the amount of PCBs that might be potentially dangerous is in dispute.

From a personal-health standpoint, dangerous
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Chemicals aren’t something you want to wash down with a good sauvignon blanc. The problem is, though, that despite the PCB issue, salmon is really good for you. “Salmon is a very important source of omega-3,” says William Harris, PhD, co-director for the Lipid and Diabetes Research Center at the Mid-America Heart Institute of St. Luke’s Hospital System in Kansas City, Missouri. “The benefits of omega-3s are documented by tremendous data showing effects on cardiovascular health, depression, all sorts of things. There are virtually no data showing that the levels of PCBs found in farmed fish increase risk for cancer.”

In fact, Harris has just finished preliminary research suggesting that the amount of omega-3 in a person’s blood could be an even better indicator of potential heart disease than her cholesterol levels. Charles Santerre, PhD, associate professor of foods and nutrition at Purdue University, thinks Harris might be onto something. Santerre has suggested that we may be able to reduce sudden cardiac deaths in the United States by 100,000 per year if people

**UPDATE**

Mercury Rising

In our June 2003 issue, we investigated the then-emerging issue of methylmercury in fish and the damage it can do to the nervous system, especially in unborn and young children. At that time, fresh tuna (among other fish) had been identified as a major contributor of mercury, and children and women of childbearing age were cautioned against eating it. Since then, mercury levels in canned tuna have also come into question. What was once a cheap, tasty lunch staple is now a choice that’s rife with questions.

In March 2004, the EPA and FDA released a joint advisory that helped clarify the issue. The advice was directed at young children and women who are pregnant, nursing, or might become pregnant. It said that popular albacore tuna had higher mercury levels than canned light tuna, and instructed that the former be eaten only once per week (up to 6 ounces) and the latter twice a week (up to 12 ounces). To see the advisory, go to www.cfsan.fda.gov/~dms/admehg3.html. —FAL
would eat fish that has eicosapentaenoic and docosahexaenoic acids (a.k.a. EPA and DHA), the healthy omega-3s in fish. He believes it’s worth following up with more studies.

Harris and other scientists say the likelihood of getting cancer from PCBs is much lower than the risk of heart disease from avoiding salmon—including the farm-raised type. "It’s like not wearing seat belts because you are afraid of being injured by one in an accident," Santerre says. "The benefits of eating salmon far outweigh whatever potential risk there might be from PCBs."

Others in the medical and nutrition community agree. Immediately after the study was released in Science, the WHO looked at the researchers’ data and concluded that eating one or two 8-ounce portions of farm-raised salmon per week would still come in below its tolerance levels that were last updated in 2001. The figures for both farm-raised and wild salmon also fall well below the FDA’s alert trigger.

PCB levels uncovered in the Science study may not accurately reflect the amount in the fillet you’re planning to grill tonight. For one thing, the samples of farmed salmon were taken a few years ago. Since then, other research from the farmed-salmon industry indicates that PCB levels have been dropping as they continue to diminish in the environment—and as salmon farmers become increasingly aware of the issue and change what they feed their fish (fish food has been identified as the main source of potential contamination).

Another factor is that PCBs tend to accumulate in animals' fatty tissues. The researchers measured the chemicals in raw salmon with the skin on, and the skin is the fattiest part of the fish. Removing it before cooking reduces the PCB level, says Rob Hale, a professor at the Virginia Institute of Marine Science. Cooking the fish so that the fat drips free further lowers PCB levels.

That said, if you’re still worried about potential contaminants but don’t want to miss the benefits of omega-3s, there’s good news: The Country of Origin Labeling Rule goes into full effect this month, enabling you to choose both wild and farmed fish from areas of the world with the least amount of PCBs (North and South America). So if you’ve been missing your favorite fish, maybe it’s time to dive in again.
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