

EUROPEAN FOOD SAFETY AUTHORITY UPDATES OPINION ON MERCURY AND METHYLMERCURY

Following a request from the European Commission, the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) Panel on Contaminants in the Food Chain (CONTAM Panel) delivered a scientific opinion on the risks to human health related to the presence of inorganic mercury and methylmercury in food.¹

EFSA's CONTAM Panel established a tolerable weekly intake (TWI) for inorganic mercury of 4 µg/kg body weight (bw), in line with the conclusion of the Joint FAO/WHO Expert Committee on Food Additives (JECFA). The panel found that fish, in particular tuna, swordfish, cod, whiting and pike, were major contributors of methylmercury in adults, with the addition of hake for children. New studies indicate that beneficial effects related to long chain omega 3 fatty acids present in fish may have previously led to an underestimation of the potential adverse effects of methylmercury in fish, EFSA said. Based on this and on a Faroese study, the CONTAM Panel has therefore proposed a TWI for methylmercury of 1.3 µg/kg body weight. That is lower than the previous level of 1.6 µg/kg bw, which had been set under provisional TWIs established in 2003 and 2010 by the JECFA. The panel advises that if measures to reduce methylmercury exposure are to be considered by risk managers, the potential beneficial effects of fish consumption should also be taken into account.

EFSA says its TWIs are intended to protect consumers from adverse health effects posed by the possible presence of the main forms of mercury found in food: methylmercury and inorganic mercury. Methylmercury is the predominant form of mercury in fish and other seafood, and is particularly toxic to the developing nervous system including the brain, said the authority. Whereas average exposure to methylmercury in food is unlikely to exceed the TWI, the likelihood of reaching such a level for high and frequent fish consumers is realistic, it said.



¹ <http://www.efsa.europa.eu/en/efsajournal/pub/2985.htm>

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