



Mercury in Sharks

Think eating shark is healthy? Think again.

Ironically, many people consume shark – in the form of pills, powders, health drinks, shark fin soup or even shark steaks - believing it is healthy. In fact, the misconceptions run so rampant, this summer, Humana, one of the world's largest health insurance companies, put shark steaks on their list of recommended "healthy eats" at the infamous Taste of Chicago. However, the reality is quite the opposite... shark is incredibly unhealthy.

Read study after study and you will find there is no accepted scientific evidence that the consumption of shark, in any form, provides any medicinal or health benefit. But a simple search on the Internet will uncover that numerous scientific studies have shown that sharks contain the highest levels of toxic mercury that is found in fish. And, that mercury – which is present in fins, cartilage and shark flesh - can be very hazardous to our health.

In fact, shark consumption carries warnings from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), and even New York City's Department of Health, to name but a few organizations.

Shark = Dangerous toxins

Indeed, there is much research and publicly available data regarding the serious health issues associated with consumption of shark due to the high levels of mercury and other contaminants in the shark's flesh. Because of these health risks, most health organizations advise that women of childbearing age and children should not consume any shark meat at all, and everyone else should limit consumption to no more than one serving per month. The Florida Dept. of Health goes further to warn that everyone should avoid any sharks over 43 inches.

The developing brain of the human fetus is very vulnerable to mercury and can result in mental disabilities. There is also an association between mercury and autism. In adults, mercury can cause damage to the central nervous system and cardiovascular system. Mercury can also lower sperm count and cause sterility among men.

Mercury poisoning our seas... and us

How have our oceans and sharks become contaminated? Booming industrial practices have led to a significant increase in mercury production. While mercury has always been present thanks to wildfires and volcanoes, 2/3rds of the mercury in the global atmosphere are from man-made sources like coal-burning power plants and waste incinerators. This mercury is released into the air and can travel thousands of miles. In fact, 30% of the mercury deposited in the US comes from China. Mercury falls to the ground, typically through rain, and enters the oceans directly or through runoff.

Phytoplankton (tiny organisms in the seas) absorbs the chemical and turns it into a more dangerous form – methyl mercury. Then, through the process of biomagnifications, the methyl mercury enters the food chain and becomes concentrated as it makes its way up. Phytoplankton is consumed by Zooplankton, which is consumed by smaller fish, which is in turn consumed by larger fish, which is eventually consumed by the top predator, sharks. The larger the organism, the more mercury it contains. As sharks can live for 50 years or more, eating many mercury-laden fish during that lifetime, they accumulate vast amounts of mercury in their body. And if we eat those sharks, in any form – whether it is pills, powder, fins or flesh - we eat all that mercury as well, absorbing it to wreak havoc on our bodies.