

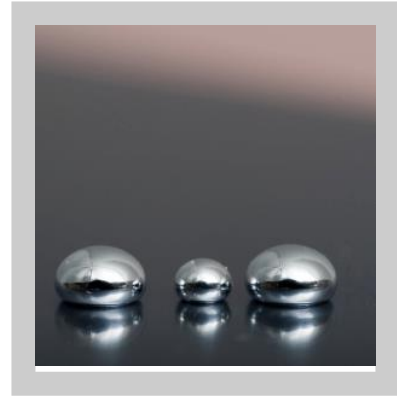
Name _____

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Mercury in Fish

Mercury is a highly toxic metal found in neon signs, fluorescent lights, older thermometers, and certain kinds of telescopes. Although scientists today understand that mercury is extremely poisonous, and so it is found in only a small number of products, in the past mercury were used in many common household objects. Mirrors, hats, photography equipment, and even several kinds of medicines used to contain various levels of mercury.

Prolonged contact with mercury can be very dangerous for human beings. Because we now know how toxic mercury is, chemists and other people who work with mercury are careful to limit their exposure to it. However, while most household objects no longer contain mercury, and most people are not exposed to it at their jobs, there is still a significant amount of mercury in something that many people eat on a regular basis: fish.



The mercury we might find in a can of tuna is most likely an indirect result of the coal industry. Mercury, which is naturally found in coal, is released into the air when coal is burned. As coal is transformed into energy, mercury vapor enters the atmosphere, becomes trapped in the clouds, and then returns to the lakes, rivers, and oceans in the form of rain. This mercury-laced rain can be carried great distances from the original coal plant. Scientists have found mercury in fish from nearly 300 streams across the country, even in bodies of water that are located hundreds of miles from coal plants.

Mercury accumulates in certain kinds of fish through a process called biomagnification. To understand bio magnification, one must first understand the food chain. The ocean's food chain starts with algae, sea plants that get their nutrients from the sun. The algae are then eaten by small sea creatures, such as shrimp. Small fish, like herring, then eat these shrimp. Larger fish, like trout, eat the herring. Even larger fish, like albacore tuna, then eat the trout. A human being might then eat the albacore tuna. Biomagnification occurs when a substance enters the food chain in small amounts at the very bottom and then increases in concentration in animals higher up on the food chain. In this example, algae absorb mercury in the seawater. Shrimp eat the mercury-filled algae, and then the shrimp are eaten by herring, which are eaten by trout, which are eaten by albacore tuna.

Once a fish eats another creature containing mercury, the mercury does not leave that fish's body, but instead it is stored in fat. Therefore, the mercury continually accumulates as more mercury-contaminated fish are eaten. There may not be very much mercury in any one of the creatures at the lower levels of the food chain, like the shrimp or the herring, for example. Yet because the tuna eats so many of the mercury-contaminated fish, the mercury concentration in the tuna's body is much higher than it is in the herring's body.

Despite the toxicity of mercury and the widespread nature of fish contamination, there is no need for the public to be overly apprehensive. Many popular fish, such as salmon, catfish, shrimp, or tilapia, are generally safe to eat. Other fish, especially tuna and grouper, should only be eaten in moderation. Young children and pregnant women should be especially cautious about how many servings of mercury-contaminated fish they have per week.

It is recommended that people in these groups not eat more than 2 servings of mercury-contaminated fish per week. Fish with the highest levels of mercury include shark, swordfish, and king mackerel. All people should avoid eating large amounts of these kinds of fish, and no one should eat these fish more frequently than once a month.