

What You Need to Know about Eating Fish Caught in Oklahoma's Lakes

Fishing is a great pastime and tradition in Oklahoma. Fish provide many benefits that are essential for a healthy diet; however, some fish pose a higher risk of mercury contamination. The Oklahoma Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) encourages Oklahomans to go fishing and enjoy eating the fish they catch. Just keep in mind that not all fish should be eaten in unlimited amounts. By following these guidelines, you can make safe, informed choices for you and your family and still enjoy the sport of fishing.

Source of the Problem

Mercury is an element that is released to the atmosphere through man-made (mining, manufacturing processes, coal-fired utilities, or industries) or natural processes (volcanoes or weathering of rocks). It falls out of the air by sticking to dust particles or gets washed out by rain or snow and then runs off into streams and lakes. When moving through the environment, mercury goes through a series of complex changes (see illustration on page 6). When these changes occur in lake and river sediments, some of the mercury can be converted to an organic form – methyl mercury. Methyl mercury enters the food chain and accumulates most readily in predator species of fish. It can then be passed to people who eat these fish.

Catching Fish

Since mercury accumulates differently in each body of water, it is impossible to visually determine whether fish in a lake, pond, or stream are safe to eat without testing them. It is important to read DEQ's fish consumption guidelines before going out to fish. To reduce health risks, follow these guidelines:

- Eat smaller, younger fish
- Eat varieties of fish that don't feed on other fish

DEQ is in the process of testing lakes in the state; however, it will not be possible to test every species of fish in every body of water.