

Don't Worry, Eat Your Fish

By ACSH Staff — October 11, 2005

An ironically timed set of news items came to my attention recently. On one hand, a new report in the journal *Archives of Neurology* revealed that consuming more than two fish items weekly was associated with a reduction in cognitive decline in older Americans, by over 10%, compared to those who ate little or no fish.

In a seemingly unrelated story, General Electric (GE) caved in at last to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and agreed to commence dredging operations in the upper Hudson River to remove contaminated sludge containing PCBs, chemicals dumped (legally) by GE in the 1960s and 1970s. This will cost at least \$700 million over a period of a decade. It is likely that both the cost and the time will expand before the process is concluded.

How do I come to merge these issues? Easily. One of the reasons, perhaps the main reason, why GE is being forced to remove PCBs from the Hudson is the assertion by the EPA that PCB-contaminated fish, when eaten by consumers, contribute to the causation of cancer and other health effects. PCBs, administered at huge doses to rodents in lab tests, can cause adverse effects -- [but this is irrelevant to human health](#) [1].

In fact, there is no valid scientific evidence that PCBs cause any adverse effects in humans attributable to the consumption of fish from the Hudson (or from anywhere else). Yet almost a billion dollars will be expended to reduce the already-minuscule amounts of chemical from the Hudson and the fish therein. This is a tremendous waste of money and effort, which will result in no benefit to human health whatsoever. The costs will be borne by all of us, in the form of higher costs passed on by GE to its customers. Another unintended consequence: Americans will be further distracted from the real causes of human cancer, some of the most prominent of which are cigarettes, excessive exposure to sunlight, excessive ingestion of alcohol, and certain infectious agents.

Actually, the real costs of these misguided regulatory strictures are far greater than I have just described. The repeated warnings that chemicals in fish cause harm to people -- especially infants and pregnant women -- naturally cause alarm among folks who would otherwise be eating fish as often as they wish. We hear similar warnings about mercury in fish, predictably provoking fear and avoidance.

Yet the fact is that eating fish containing mercury or PCBs at commonly encountered levels has no adverse effect on human health (see ACSH's publications on [mercury in the environment](#) [2] and [trace levels of chemicals](#) [3], plus "The public health implications of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) in the environment" in *Ecotoxicology and Environmental Safety*, Volume 59, Issue 3, November 2004, pages 275-291).

Furthermore, fish is one of the most healthful of dietary selections. It is a good source of protein and omega-3 fatty acids, which are known to be beneficial for our hearts and brains. Several studies have shown that eating more fish, especially fatty fish, is associated with lower rates of heart disease and sudden cardiac death. Three such studies, published in well-respected, peer-reviewed medical journals, and an editorial endorsing fish consumption that appeared in the *New England Journal of Medicine* are summarized in an ACSH article from 2002, "[Fatty Fish and Healthy Hearts.](#)" [4]

When these advantages are added to the reduced rate of intellectual impairment in seniors, mentioned earlier, it's clear it's time to stop listening to the fear-mongers and their fishy warnings. Eat your fish, it's good for you.

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