Fish consumption during pregnancy or while breast-feeding

By ACSH Staff — June 11, 2014

Pregnant women are inundated with information about what to do and what not to do during pregnancy, what to eat and what not to eat, and often that information varies depending on who you are talking to. Fish consumption during pregnancy is one of those widely debated topics. Now, the Food and Drug Administration and the Environmental Protection Agency are altering their recommendations regarding fish consumption and telling women who are pregnant or breast-feeding and young children to eat at least two servings (eight ounces) of low-mercury seafood each week. Previously, only an upper limit on fish consumption of about three servings (twelve ounces) was set. The advisory adds that pregnant women and children should not eat high-mercury fish such as shark, swordfish, king mackerel and tilefish.

These recommendations were spurred by an FDA analysis that found that twenty percent of pregnant women ate little to no fish. And according to Dr. Stephen Ostroff, the FDA’s acting chief scientist, these recommendations are much needed as eating fish has developmental and health benefits to the woman and her baby. He also adds that the same benefits cannot be derived from taking a supplement.

However, Dr. Roger B. Newman, the director of the obstetrics and gynecology department at the Medical University of South Carolina says that these recommendations may scare women away from eating fish by keeping the upper limit on weekly fish consumption. He says, Seafood has multiple nutritional benefits to pregnant women, to developing fetuses and to young children. I’m disappointed in the recommendations. But I do think they’re a step in the right direction.

ACSH’s Ariel Savransky adds, It is important to educate pregnant women in addition to putting out these guidelines to ensure that they consume an adequate amount of fish. Without the education component, pregnant women will not know what to make of the guidelines. Educational efforts should also focus on what kinds of fish to consume and appropriate cooking methods. Warnings about various mercury-containing fish from the government have likely scared pregnant women off fish entirely. ACSH has discussed the fallacy of some of these warnings in the past, so it’s good to see some back-tracking on this from DC.
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