

HOW TO MANIPULATE MERCURY STATISTICS FOR CANNED TUNA

As usual, the devil is in the details. Moral of the story: Look for troll-caught.

In March 2004, the FDA released tests indicating that canned albacore has higher levels of mercury than other kinds of tuna—something that caused a media storm. Unfortunately, this *can* be true. *But it can also be false.* Here's a case where the devil is in the details—details the FDA still has not reported.

Consider, for example, a recent study conducted by Oregon State University researchers who found mercury concentrations in albacore caught off the west coast of the United States to be well below the level cited by the FDA.

According to Michael Morrissey, the author of the study and director of OSU's SeaFood Laboratory in Astoria, the Pacific albacore fishery includes troll-caught fish. These are younger fish, which average 10-25 pounds. These fish are demonstrated to have lower levels of mercury and high levels of Omega3s. If a can of albacore does not specifically state it was troll-caught, there is indeed a risk that it contains mature tuna with lower Omega3s and high mercury.

The story on chunk tuna is more confusing. Canned chunk light tuna generally includes yellowfin and/or skipjack. Yellowfin can weigh up to several hundred pounds, placing them high on the food chain where they are more likely to have accumulated high levels of mercury contamination. The younger skipjack, which usually weigh no more than 25 pounds, are lower on the food chain and therefore are likely to have low levels of mercury.

The bottom line: chunk light tuna is not a well-defined term. As a consequence, data with respect to mercury content may vary widely, depending on what's available, economically feasible, or even contaminated.

Just as we distinguish between species of salmon and where they come from, it is necessary to carefully distinguish between different species of tuna and even the methods of capture. It is heartening to note that environmentally conscious trolling as practiced by the American fleet is the source of the young lower mercury albacore.