

Wellness EMPLOYEE report



Seafood

With Canada's abundance of coastline and inland lakes, rivers, and waterways, the selection of fish and seafood in supermarkets is both plentiful and affordable. But many people simply forget to include it in their meals each week.

Canada's Food Guide (2006) recommends we eat at least two servings (75g) of seafood a week (seafood commonly includes fish such as salmon, sardines, trout, shellfish and crustaceans). Despite a lot of confusing, if not contradictory, information swimming around about the health benefits and risks of including fish as part of a regular diet, Health Canada and other experts around the world agree that seafood is an important part of a healthy diet. Furthermore, the seafood available for sale on the Canadian market, whether domestic or imported, is safe.

It's good for you

Seafood is an excellent source of protein, with most fish low in saturated fat and a high source of vitamin D. All seafood contains at least some omega-3 fatty acids – fats that we need to get through food to compensate for the limited amount produced by our bodies. Some types of seafood have higher levels of omega-3s than others. Oily fish (including tuna, salmon, mackerel, lake trout, herring and sardines) for example, have high levels of omega-3 fats so these are considered particularly heart-healthy.

"Omega-3 fat is a polyunsaturated fat that can lower bad cholesterol levels, help prevent blood clotting, and help lower triglycerides leading to a reduction in risk for heart disease and stroke," says Elaine Shelton, Director of Health Promotion at the Heart & Stroke Foundation in Halifax.

Keep in mind that deep-fried fish or fast food fish sandwiches don't offer the same heart health benefits as fish prepared using lower fat methods such as grilling, poaching, broiling or baking.

Allergic reactions

In Canada, an allergy to seafood is considered one of the nine most common food allergies (the others include peanuts, tree nuts, sesame seeds, milk, eggs, soy, wheat and sulphites – a food additive). Allergic reactions can happen when the body's immune system overreacts to a particular substance. As with all foods, it's important to store, handle, and prepare seafood appropriately to prevent any kind of reaction or illness. Children, pregnant women, the elderly and people with weaker immune systems are particularly susceptible to illness and should avoid eating raw or undercooked shellfish. In fact, seafood on the whole should always be kept refrigerated or on ice.

Contaminants

Seafood's abundance of nutrients can contribute to a healthy diet for Canadians. That being said, seafood can also contain low levels of environmental contaminants, marine toxins, chemicals and bacteria that can cause food poisoning. For most sources of seafood, the levels of contaminants are well-below the standards established by Health Canada. Some types of fish, if they are eaten often, might result in an unhealthy exposure to mercury, but according to Health Canada, most

Canadians don't need to be concerned about mercury exposure as a result of fish consumption. Predatory fish that eat a lot of other fish tend to contain higher levels of mercury. This is because fish can accumulate trace amounts of mercury in their muscles, and this mercury can concentrate up the food chain.

Health Canada has identified certain types of fish that should be eaten in moderation, including fresh or frozen tuna, shark, swordfish and marlin. No consumption limits have been set for canned light tuna (the most commonly eaten type of tuna), as canned tuna

products are generally made up of younger and smaller fish and so they contain significantly less mercury than larger and older types of tuna that are sold in fresh or frozen portions.

People are worried about contaminants (dioxins and PCB residues). Except for mercury, most contaminants are stored in fat. Because mercury is stored in muscle tissue, preparation and cooking methods won't affect mercury if it's present. You can cut down on other contaminants using cooking methods that remove fat from fish (such as trimming away fat before fish is cooked).

Cross-contamination

Cross contamination is the transfer of an ingredient (food allergen) to a product that does not normally have that ingredient in it. Through cross contamination, a food that should not contain the allergen could become dangerous to eat for those who are allergic.

Cross contamination can happen during food manufacturing through shared production and packaging equipment, or at the retail level through shared equipment (including cheese and deli meats sliced on the same slicer). It can also happen at home or in restaurants through equipment, utensils, and hands.

Make sure you read product labels carefully to avoid products that contain seafood and seafood derivatives. Avoid food and products that do not have an ingredient list, and make sure you read labels every time you shop.

Manufacturers may occasionally change their recipes or use different ingredients for varieties of the same brand.

Source: Health Canada

Although no single food on its own can ensure a person's health, including seafood in the mix is just one way that we can help improve our diets, and contribute to our overall health. Incorporating seafood is as simple as slowly substituting it for another type of meal each week, and building to two seafood servings a week.

So have fun, try out some easy recipes, and gradually expand your food choices. When you put theory into practise, you'll find that a lot of small changes can add up to make a big difference.

Sources: Canada Food Guide; Health Canada (www.seafoodcanada.gc.ca); Canadian Food Inspection Agency (www.inspection.gc.ca); www.health.com; Dietitians of Canada (www.dietitians.ca); BeceL @ www.loveyourheart.ca.



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