

June 10, 1997



news release

From The Texas Department of Health
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TDH Website: www.tdh.state.tx.us

Elevated Mercury Levels in King Mackerel Prompt Consumption Advisory

The Texas Department of Health (TDH) today issued an advisory limiting the consumption of king mackerel from the Gulf of Mexico after tests showed elevated levels of mercury in the fish.

The advisory recommends not eating king mackerel longer than 43 inches. It limits consumption of king mackerel measuring from 37 to 43 inches in length to one eight-ounce serving per week for adults and one per month for children and females of childbearing age. The advisory does not restrict consumption of king mackerel under 37 inches.

Health officials said the consumption advisory is a preventive measure. "This does not mean anyone who occasionally eats more king mackerel than recommended definitely will suffer adverse health effects," said Kirk Wiles, assistant director of TDH's Seafood Safety Division. "We're concerned primarily with children, females of childbearing age and anyone who regularly consumes the larger king mackerel."

Mercury is a naturally occurring element that can be toxic when consumed by humans. Continual ingestion of methyl mercury, the compound found in the king mackerel, can harm the human brain and nervous system. Young children are especially at risk. The brain and nervous system in developing fetuses can be permanently damaged if pregnant females eat foods containing elevated levels of mercury.

Mercury gets into the air and water from the natural weathering of the earth's crust, from the burning of garbage and fuels and from emissions from factories that use mercury. No specific source of the mercury in the gulf king mackerel has been determined.

The advisory does not apply to canned mackerel, a different species of mackerel.

Officials said the mercury content in gulf waters is negligible and that elevated mercury levels in the king mackerel are the result of accumulation along the food chain. Larger king mackerel contain more mercury. TDH officials encourage persons who fish for king mackerel to keep only those under 37 inches long. There is no risk of mercury contamination from contact with the water.

King mackerel, also called kingfish or king, migrates to Texas coastal waters from off the coasts of Florida and Mexico. It is most abundant in Texas coastal waters from spring through fall and is one of the most popular fish targeted by recreational fishers in the gulf. TDH's advisory is similar to ones issued in Florida, Alabama and Mississippi.

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(For more information, contact: Kirk Wiles, TDH Seafood Safety Division, 512-719-0215; or Doug McBride, TDH Public Information Officer, Austin, 512-458-7111, Ext. 2214 or 512-458-7400.)