

UK fish study backs up health claims

28/10/2005 - **A UK survey of contaminant levels in fish and fish oils should help back up health claims and ease fears over the safety of consuming fish-based products.**

According to the UK's Food Standard Agency (FSA) study of various [fish](#) and seafood specimens, levels of lead, mercury and cadmium are sufficiently low for the agency to continue to advise the consumption of fish - especially oily fish - as part of a healthy balanced diet.

In fact the five surveys, which were carried out as part of routine monitoring, show that levels of contaminants are similar to or have decreased since they were previously measured.

This is good news for the fish and fish oils industry, which has rapidly expanded on the back of increased awareness of the health benefits associated with oily fish. The European omega-3 fatty acids market for example, which is currently worth \$195 million (marine oils make up 77 per cent of this), is forecast to grow around 8 per cent on average to 2010, according to Frost & Sullivan.

Such market growth however has been threatened by increasing concern over contamination levels in fish. The European Food Safety Authority (EFSA)'s Scientific Panel on Contaminants in the Food Chain (CONTAM) recently published an opinion regarding the possible risks to human health associated with the consumption of foods contaminated with mercury.

It called for further studies on vulnerable population groups, including children and women of childbearing age, where specific intake data are lacking.

And in California, Californian Attorney Bill Lockyer is even suing the seafood industry for failing to label albacore and light tuna products with warnings over potential mercury content.

It is very unlikely that such a case would be brought up in either in the UK or Europe as a whole. Indeed, the [FSA](#) was among the first national food authorities to issue safe intake levels on fish, backed up by growing scientific evidence that suggested that oily fish could reduce the risk of death from heart disease.

The agency concluded that *"an increase in population oily fish consumption to one portion a week...would confer significant public health benefits in terms of reduced risk of cardiovascular disease. There is also evidence that increased fish consumption might have beneficial effects on foetal development"*. As a result, the FSA advises that people should eat at least two portions of fish a week, one of which should be oily.

There are also already safeguards in place. Scientific experts from the Food and Agriculture Organization/World Health Organization Joint Expert Committee on Food Additives and EFSA have considered these contaminants and set guidelines as to how much can be consumed without posing a risk to people's health.

In addition, the European Commission has set legal limits for some contaminants in food that take into account safety and other considerations, such as measures that should be taken by industry to reduce the levels. Occasional consumption of products that slightly exceed these limits would not be a concern for people's health.