

Community FISH Report: Background

Fish are Important for Superior Health (FISH) Project



November 2015

Women of childbearing age recently participated in a project with Sawtooth Mountain Clinic, Grand Portage Health Service, and the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH). The Fish are Important for Superior Health (FISH) Project focused on helping women and their families enjoy the health benefits of eating fish while lowering their exposure to mercury. The FISH Project took place in Cook County, Minnesota, along the North Shore of Lake Superior.

Why did we do this project?

The main reason for doing the FISH Project was to reduce mercury exposure in women who are or may become pregnant and, therefore, reduce exposure in future babies.

- A recent study (*Mercury in Newborns in the Lake Superior Basin*) showed that 10% of Minnesota babies tested from the North Shore area had mercury in their blood above the level considered safe.
- Fish and fishing are an important part of history and culture for communities along the North Shore of Lake Superior. Women living in this area have reported frequently eating fish that have higher levels of mercury.



Who participated in FISH? What did we find out?

Between May 2014 and June 2015, 499 women ages 16 to 50 who live in or near Cook County took part in FISH. The results for the FISH Project can be found online at www.sawtoothmountainclinic.org and click on the FISH Project news link. A final technical report will be completed and available on the website later in 2016.

Why is mercury a concern?

Most people's exposure to mercury comes from eating fish. Mercury in Minnesota waters and fish is a result of worldwide emissions from coal combustion, mining, other human activities, and natural sources.

Mercury exposure can affect a person at any age. However, the developing fetus and young children are most at risk from mercury in fish. Too much mercury can affect a child's ability to learn and process information.

Are there benefits from eating fish?

Even though fish contain mercury and possibly other contaminants, there are good reasons to eat fish. Fish is low in bad fats and a good source of protein, iodine, and vitamin D. Fish is also one of the only foods naturally high in DHA and EPA omega-3 fatty acids, which are needed by the body, especially for eye and brain development.

For more info...

MN Fish Consumption Guidelines

www.health.state.mn.us/fish ¹

1-800-657-3908

What made the FISH Project a success?

Community involvement, collaboration, and cooperation made the FISH Project a huge success! FISH promotional venues included newspaper and media outlets, flyers and brochures at local businesses, special events, and word-of-mouth advertising. Thank you to our many project partners and community supporters. Most of all, we are grateful to the 499 women who volunteered their time to take part!

Project Partners

Sawtooth Mountain Clinic
Grand Portage Health Service
Cook County North Shore Hospital
Grand Portage Trust Lands and
Reservation Tribal Council
Minnesota Department of Health

Community Supporters

WTIP North Shore Community Radio
North Shore Journal
Northern Wilds
Cook County News Herald
Two Dogs in the Web
Birch Grove Community Center
Numerous local businesses, schools,
and churches

What do participants say about the FISH Project?

- *“Cook County North Shore Hospital is really good at drawing blood – I almost didn’t participate, but they made it so easy.”*
- *“I liked the amount of information provided on the types of fish and how much is recommended to eat.”*
- *“Fun and easy! It’s a great project and a good reminder for me to still be careful which types of fish I eat, even though I don’t intend to get pregnant again.”*
- *“In my diet, I believe the [too many meals of] Saganaga Lake, Lake Trout are the culprits for my high mercury levels. I have eaten less meals of Lake Trout since my last blood draw.”*
- *“Good opportunity to learn more about the health benefits of eating fish.”*
- *“Thank you for allowing me to be a part of your project. Women’s health is very important to me, and I feel that this project will help shed light on our local mercury levels.”*
- *“I think it is so important to know how to eat healthy and incorporate fish into your diet... I eat some fish, but not a lot, and I should do a better job of eating more.”*
- *“Very interesting to be a part of the study - mercury in fish is not something I really thought about before, so it’s good to be more aware and have resources about it.”*
- *“It is neat to be participating in the FISH project and even though I don’t like needles it is worth the information learned.”*

What did FISH participants have to do?

After signing an informed consent, each participant:

1. Answered questions about fish they ate:
 - three simple screening question about fish they ate recently, and
 - detailed questions about the fish they had eaten in the past year.
2. Provided a blood sample to be analyzed for mercury and fatty acids.
3. Received information about the health benefits of eating fish and how to choose fish to eat that are low in mercury.
4. Received \$50 in VISA gift cards for taking part.

Most women completed the confidential FISH visit in about 45 minutes. Some women were asked to return for a second visit 6 months later.

What if I have more questions about the FISH Project?

Check out the FISH website: www.sawtoothmountainclinic.org and click on the FISH Project news link

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218-387-2330
Grand Portage Health Service
218-475-2235