

OFFICE OF THE CHIEF PUBLIC HEALTH OFFICER

Public Health Advisory

YELLOWKNIFE (February 9th, 2012) – Dr. Lorne Clearsky, Chief Public Health Officer, is advising residents of the Northwest Territories of elevated mercury levels in fish from one lake. Thereby, a public health notice is in effect, recommending people limit the quantity of pike and walleye they eat from the following lake:

Ekali Lake (also known locally as Kelly Lake) - Dehcho

Generally, fish is considered to be a good source of nutrition and high in protein, Vitamin B and omega-3 fatty acids. The health benefits of eating fish are thought to outweigh the potential risks presented by some contaminants. Mercury is a contaminant that can be found in almost all fish. Levels of mercury differ from lake to lake and from fish species to species and can be due to human activities or to natural causes. For retail fish, Health Canada has established guidelines on what levels of mercury are acceptable to consume. To reduce exposure, it is recommended that people adhere to the following recommendations:

- Eat smaller fish
- Eat more fish that are lower in the food chain, such as whitefish or grayling and eat less that are higher in the food chain such as walleye, northern pike or lake trout

Based on Canada's Food Guide, one serving of fish is considered to be 75g, basically a deck of cards. Below are recommendations specific to Ekali Lake (Kelly Lake in the Deh Cho region) which is located on the Mackenzie Highway 30 Kilometres from the town of Jean Marie River. Compared to 1996 levels, there has been a significant change in the levels of mercury in the following fish muscle.

Please note that this advice applies only to those individuals who eat northern pike or walleye on a regular or weekly basis for a number of months from this lake. An occasional large fish meal especially if consuming smaller fish would not pose any health risk. Although mercury can accumulate through regular fish consumption, the body is able to slowly eliminate mercury. The key is to balance consumption with this natural elimination process. White fish can be consumed without any restrictions.

Northern Pike

The mean mercury level is 0.62 ppm for northern pike. This is above Health Canada's recommendations.

The general population should consume no more than 150 grams (0.3 lbs) per week. This is equally to 2 servings a fish per week. Pregnant or breastfeeding mothers should eat no more than 150 grams (0.3lbs) per month. This is equal to 2 servings of fish per month. Children between five and 11 years of age can eat up to 125 grams (0.276 lbs) per month. This is equal to 1 and $\frac{3}{4}$ servings a month. Young children between one and four years of age should eat no more than 75 grams (0.165 lbs) per month. This is equal to 1 serving a month.

Walleye

The mean mercury level is 0.54 ppm for walleye. This is slightly above Health Canada's recommendations.

The general population should consume no more than 150 grams (0.3 lbs) per week. This is equally to 2 servings a fish per week. Pregnant or breastfeeding mothers should eat no more than 150 grams (0.3lbs) per month. This is equal to 2 servings of fish per month. Children between five and 11 years of age can eat up to 125 grams (0.276 lbs) per month. This is equal to 1 and $\frac{3}{4}$ servings a month. Young children between one and four years of age should eat no more than 75 grams (0.165 lbs) per month. This is equal to 1 serving a month.

Lake Whitefish

Levels of mercury in lake whitefish muscle are well below Health Canada's retail fish consumption guidelines. This fish can be eaten in unrestricted amounts.

For a complete list of lakes with elevated mercury levels please visit:

http://www.hlthss.gov.nt.ca/english/services/environmental_health/food_safety/contaminants/mercury/default.htm

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