Gulf Seafood Institute Comments on New FDA Seafood Guides for Pregnant Women

GSI’s executive director Margaret Henderson, who is currently pregnant with her third child, encourages moms to eat more seafood, especially Gulf Seafood. Henderson with her two daughters, Clara Ann (left), who is 19 months, and three year old Maggie. Photo: Henderson Strategies

by News Editor / Newsroom Ink on April 1, 2015

The Gulf Seafood Institute (GSI), a trade association with members in the five Gulf states representing every aspect of the seafood industry – harvesters, processors, wholesalers, retailers, restaurateurs and the charter-for-hire community, will provide public comment to the Food and Drug Administration’s (FDA) draft fish consumption advice entitled “Fish: What Pregnant Women Should Know.”

Every year since 1993, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has made available to the public a compendium of information on locally issued fish advisories and safe eating guidelines. This information is provided to EPA by states, U.S. territories, Indian tribes, and local governments who issue fish consumption advisories and safe eating guidelines to inform people about the recommended level of consumption for fish caught in local waters.
The FDA and the EPA are revising their joint fish consumption advice and questions & answers to encourage pregnant women, those who may become pregnant, breastfeeding mothers, and young children to eat more fish, like Gulf shrimp. Photo: Facebook

The FDA and the EPA are revising their joint fish consumption advice and questions & answers to encourage pregnant women, those who may become pregnant, breastfeeding mothers, and young children to eat more fish and a variety of fish from choices that are lower in mercury.

“We are pleased to see that the FDA in its 2014 draft advice is, based on the latest science, encouraging pregnant women to eat more seafood,” said GSI’s executive director Margaret Henderson, who is currently pregnant with her third child. “Fish is a lean, low-calorie source of protein. Previous FDA advice regarding seafood consumption has been confusing and has deterred pregnant women from eating seafood—thus reducing access to these beneficial nutrients for babies and even raising concerns about the unintentional negative health consequences for babies and their mothers.”

Key Message

The key message of the new “Seafood Guides for Pregnant Women” is that women who are pregnant, might become pregnant or breastfeeding should eat 8 to 12 ounces of a variety of fish each week from choices that are lower in mercury. The nutritional value of fish is important during growth and development before birth, in early infancy for breastfed infants, and in childhood.

GSI board member Jennifer Jenkins, manager of Mississippi’s Crystal Sea Seafood and a mother of one explained that the organization would also like to see a clearer description on the recommended amounts of seafood to be consumed per week.

The FDA is issuing the new advice after recent reports show many pregnant women in the United States are not consuming fish in amounts recommended by the Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2010. There is longstanding evidence of the nutritional value of fish in the diet. Fish contain high quality protein, many vitamins and minerals, omega-3 fatty acids, are mostly low in saturated fat, and some fish even contain vitamin D. The nutritional value of fish is especially important during growth and development before birth, in early infancy for breastfed infants, and in childhood.

According to Henderson, GSI believes a seafood rich diet is beneficial to one’s health, and Americans would benefit from including more Gulf seafood in their diets. “We are strongly encouraged by the changes made in the draft advice, yet there still seems to be a lack of clarity regarding the specific health benefits of omega-3s—specifically, optimal neurodevelopmental and eye formation,” she said. “Pregnant women are eager to understand how making healthy nutrition decisions benefits their babies. As such, we recommend clear language emphasizing how omega-3s help babies as they develop in the womb.”
GSI board member Jennifer Jenkins, manager of Mississippi’s Crystal Seas Seafood and a mother of one explained that the organization would also like to see a clearer description on the recommended amounts of seafood to be consumed per week.

“All our members share the common value of working to make healthful and abundant Gulf seafood available to all,” said the head of the organization formed in 2013 to protect the Gulf’s unique culture and environment while elevating the Gulf seafood brand with consumers, customers and policy leaders through advocacy, education and science. “Additionally, GSI seeks to bolster fisheries science and research to help preserve the Gulf seafood resource and contribute to the longevity of our industry.

GSI board member Jennifer Jenkins, manager of Mississippi’s Crystal Seas Seafood and a mother of one explained that the organization would also like to see a clearer description on the recommended amounts of seafood to be consumed per week.

“The suggested 8oz per week minimum of a variety of seafood is a marked improvement over the previous advice, but what exactly is 8oz?,” she asked “For many, visualizing an ounce, or eight, is difficult to do, whereas recommending that pregnant women consume a minimum of two to three meals a week provides a healthful visual for consumers.”

The new FDA current advice currently includes:

- **Eat 8-12 ounces of a variety of fish a week.**
  - That’s 2 or 3 servings of fish a week.
  - For young children, give them 2 or 3 servings of fish a week with the portion right for the child’s age and calorie needs.
- **Choose fish lower in mercury.**
  - Many of the most commonly eaten fish are lower in mercury.
  - These include salmon, shrimp, pollock, tuna (light canned), tilapia, catfish, and cod.
- **Avoid 4 types of fish: tilefish from the Gulf of Mexico, shark, swordfish, and king mackerel.**
  - These 4 types of fish are highest in mercury.
  - Limit white (albacore) tuna to 6 ounces a week.
- **When eating fish you or others have caught from streams, rivers, and lakes, pay attention to fish advisories on those waterbodies.**
  - If advice isn’t available, adults should limit such fish to 6 ounces a week and young children to 1 to 3 ounces a week and not eat other fish that week.
  - When adding more fish to your diet, be sure to stay within your calorie needs.

**Avoid Negative Labeling**

Based on the latest science conducted by FDA, GSI encourages the FDA to shy away from “fish to avoid” mentions in the new consumer advice. The FDA’s net effects report concluded that all commercially available seafood is healthy and safe. Despite improved communications regarding the net benefits of seafood, any language warning pregnant women about certain rarely eaten species of fish will scare women away from eating fish altogether.

http://gulfseafoodnews.com/2015/04/01/fda-seafood-guides-for-pregnant-women/
“Pregnancy is a time when women are understandably risk-averse, and having federal guidance with unclear language about which fish to avoid causes apprehension about consuming any seafood out of fear of accidentally choosing the wrong one,” said GSI’s Margaret Henderson. Photo: Henderson Strategies

“Pregnancy is a time when women are understandably risk-averse, and having federal guidance with unclear language about which fish to avoid causes apprehension about consuming any seafood out of fear of accidentally choosing the wrong one,” said Henderson. “This is confusing to consumers because the four fish pregnant women need to avoid – shark, swordfish, king mackerel and tilefish – are rarely eaten by the general population, let alone pregnant women.”

The 2014 Net Effects report also appears to conflict with its consumer advice is that canned tuna—both light and albacore—are safe for pregnant women and developing babies. The report states that up to 56 ounces (more than 4.6 pounds) per week is safe for mom and baby. Additionally, the 2015 Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee recommends in their March 2015 report that the FDA re-evaluate its 6-ounce limit on albacore to reflect the latest science that shows more than four times this amount is safe and healthy.

“Canned tuna may be the only option that some women have for getting those critical omega-3s, particularly women in lower income populations, who may not have access to higher-priced fish like salmon and sardines,” said Jenkins.

In its comments, GSI encourages the FDA to take into account other health benefits from eating a seafood rich diet; such as, how emerging research shows that selenium, a mineral naturally found in fish, may help protect against any toxic or adverse effects of mercury in the body. Selenium binds to mercury, preventing it from binding to other compounds, even those found in the human body, like brain tissue.

“It is important that FDA completes this updated advice quickly to reflect the importance of eating seafood for the healthy development of a baby during pregnancy,” said Henderson. Doing so will help get more Americans to eat more seafood and have access to the unique health benefits that a diet rich in omega-3s has to offer. More Americans buying seafood will also directly help the economy of the Gulf region that has suffered immensely since the 2010 oil spill, which also gave consumers unnecessary concerns with the safety of Gulf seafood.”

Don’t be shellfish...
Gulf Seafood Institute’s Mission

Uniting seafood communities of five Gulf States, the Gulf Seafood Institute’s mission is to protect the Gulf’s unique culture while elevating the Gulf Seafood brand with consumers, customers and policy leaders through advocacy, education and science.

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