

[Print Page](#)

Fish advisory issued for Priest Lake

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News editor

SANDPOINT -- The Idaho Department of Health and Welfare is advising pregnant women and small children to limit their consumption of lake trout from Priest Lake due to the level of mercury found in the fish.

The mercury levels are not high enough to pose a health threat to the general public. However, the levels could affect unborn or small children because their central nervous systems are developing and particularly sensitive to mercury.

"Due to the possibility that a child's health could be affected by exposure to mercury in the womb, through breast-feeding or by eating fish, we have issued the advisory with specific recommendations," said Chris Corwin of the Fish Advisory Program for the department's Division of Health.

The recommendations include:

- Woman who are pregnant, breast-feeding, or planning to become pregnant should restrict their consumption of Priest Lake lake trout to no more than four meals per month
- Children under the age of 7 should not eat more than two meals per month of lake trout from Priest Lake.

Corwin also recommends that pregnant women should abstain from eating other kinds of fish if they intend to eat Priest Lake lake trout four times a month.

The Priest Lake trout advisory is not as strict as the one issued for Lake Pend Oreille lake trout in May 2005. The Pend Oreille advisory recommends that pregnant women should eat no more than two servings a month and children under 7 should refrain from eating more than one serving per month. The Pend Oreille advisory also urges the general public consume no more than three servings a month.

With store-bought tuna, pregnant women are advised to eat no more than eight servings a month, said Corwin.

"This advisory is about as twice as strict as tuna," he said of the Priest Lake recommendation.

Mercury is a naturally occurring element which can be found throughout the environment, including the atmosphere. Mercury is also released into the environment from the burning of coal and hazardous waste.

A 2002 U.S. Geological Survey concluded that 70 percent of the atmospheric mercury present in the last century came from human-caused sources, Corwin said. However, mercury levels have dropped significantly in the last two decades prior to the study, corresponding with the Clean Air Act and other air pollution regulations.

When mercury falls from the air or runs off the ground into the water, certain microorganisms in soils and sediments convert part of it into a highly toxic form of mercury called methylmercury, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Small organisms take up methylmercury as they feed, which is then passed up the food chain as they are consumed by other animals.

Lake trout, a long-lived, slow-growing fish, is also the subject of consumption advisories in Montana.

"Lake trout are high on the food chain," Corwin said. "The higher it is, it's typically going to have more mercury."

Mercury exposure, at high levels, can harm internal organs and a person's central nervous system, said Susan Cuff, a Panhandle Health District spokeswoman. The harmful effects can also be passed on to a developing fetus.

"Children who have large amounts of mercury can develop nervous and digestive system problems and kidney damage," she said.

People can deal with small amounts of mercury if they stay within the limits of fish consumption advisories and have no other significant exposures to mercury, Corwin said.

"In humans, it will go away," he said. "We expel mercury a couple of different ways."

- Coeur d'Alene Press reporter Mike McLean contributed to this report.