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Benefits of Eating Farmed Salmon Called into Question in New Study

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ALBANY, N.Y. (November 22, 2005) -- The health benefits associated with eating farmed salmon have been questioned by a new report recently published in the *Journal of Nutrition*. While health benefits of eating salmon, such as prevention of sudden cardiac death, have been well documented, new research indicates that some of the toxic pollutants found in both farm-raised and wild salmon counteract the beneficial effects of the omega-3 fatty acids present in the fish and may increase the risk of other diseases. The article, "Quantitative Analysis of the Benefits and Risks of Consuming Farmed and Wild Salmon," appears in the Nov. 2005 issue of the journal.

"We performed a quantitative analysis of the benefits versus the risks of consuming farmed and wild salmon," said David O. Carpenter, MD, Director of the Institute for Health and the Environment at the University at Albany's School of Public Health. "The risks from salmon consumption are caused by the contaminants, which increase the risk of cancer. In the developing fetus, some of these contaminants cause harm to the nervous system, leading to a reduced IQ and shortened attention span."

"The presence of contaminants in the farm-raised salmon at least partially offset the benefits of consumption," said lead author Jeffrey A. Foran, president, Midwest Center for Environmental Science and Public Policy and adjunct professor at the University of Illinois-Chicago. "While the benefits from eating foods such as salmon that contain omega-3 fatty acids include reduced risk of dying of a cardiac arrhythmia after a heart attack, omega-3 fatty acids are not known to have any beneficial effect in preventing cancer," added Foran, who is also an associate faculty member with UAlbany's Institute for Health and the Environment. "Omega-3 fatty acids are present in all salmon, but at substantially higher concentrations in farmed than in wild salmon."

The authors used the fish consumption advisories developed by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency for cancer and non-cancer health effects and the fish consumption advisory issued by the American Heart Association to develop a quantitative comparison of the benefits and risks caused by consumption of farmed and wild salmon. The advisories conclude that younger people are at risk of accumulating carcinogenic agents in their bodies and harming a developing child, but are not at risk of a heart attack.

The analysis concluded:

- The benefits exceed the risks for wild Pacific salmon, but the risks exceed the benefits for farmed Atlantic salmon as a group.
- Children and younger people, especially women of child-bearing age, pregnant women, and nursing mothers should reduce their exposure to the contaminants found in salmon.
- For people at risk for heart attacks, a diet that includes omega-3 fatty acids is important, but eating salmon that is high in contaminants is not necessary.

Omega-3 fatty acids can be consumed in many forms of seafood, including wild salmon, farm-raised salmon from Chile (which were found to contain the lowest concentrations of pollutants in farm-raised populations), and in some oils, nuts, and vegetables.

The findings reinforce the recommendations given by the authors in earlier publications: Consumers should be informed about where the salmon they purchase comes from, and the salmon aquaculture industry should find ways to provide a product that does not contain high levels of contaminants. Recent studies from Scotland, for instance, have reported that feeding farmed salmon plant-based oils except for the last 24 weeks resulted in salmon with significantly lower levels of contaminants but with 80 percent of the healthy omega-3 fatty acids obtained from the standard diet.

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