

The Record Sunday, August 14, 2005 B1
Section: Local

Mercury-laden fish pose risk to women, children

By Dana Nichols
Record Staff Writer

STOCKTON Stockton women who eat too much Delta fish are exposing themselves and their unborn children to toxins that can cause brain damage and other health problems, a state researcher says.

A survey of 500 low-income women conducted last year in Stockton found that a third of them were regularly eating fish caught in the Delta and in nearby rivers and lakes. Roughly a quarter of those were eating more of the fish than recommended by government health guidelines intended to prevent mercury damage, said Alyce Ujihara, a scientist in the California Department of Health Services Environmental Health Investigation branch.

CALFED, the joint state and federal program seeking to restore the Delta and secure its water supply, is spending \$4.5 million during the next three years to study mercury and warn residents of its dangers.

Studies that began in the last year include monitoring mercury levels in fish living in area rivers and bays, surveying the habits of anglers and fish consumers and researching how pure metallic mercury gets converted to methylmercury, the form that is poisonous to animals and people.

California is naturally rich in mercury. Between 1860 and 1980, about 90 percent of the mercury mined in the United States came from the coast range of Northern California, said Jay Davis, a research scientist for the San Francisco Estuary Institute and one of those leading the research program.

Gold Rush miners used mercury to extract gold from crushed ore.

Thousands of tons of mercury from those gold-mining operations washed into California's rivers, sloughs and bays. But only about 1 percent of that mercury exists in the methyl form that accumulates in the food chain, Davis said.

Methylmercury became world famous in the 1950s and 1950s when hundreds of residents of Minamata, a fishing village in Japan, died and others gave birth to grotesquely deformed babies because a chemical plant dumped the pollutant into waterways.

The methylmercury levels in fish here are much lower but are often above government safety guidelines. Fish tested from the San Joaquin, Cosumnes and Feather rivers typically have mercury levels ranging from .5 parts per million to 1 part per million or more, Davis said.

Some fish in the central Delta have lower levels, sometimes even lower than the .3 parts per million safety standard the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency recommends for people who eat fish three times a month.

You can reduce your exposure by knowing the species that are low and the places that are low." Davis said.

For example, striped bass, largemouth bass and catfish tend to have high levels of mercury, Davis said. Bluegills and salmon have lower levels.

But catfish and largemouth bass don't move around much, so if they are caught in a relatively low-mercury area like the central Delta, they tend to be less contaminated, Davis said.

Striped bass, on the other hand, move around a lot and are likely to be high in mercury no matter where they are caught, Davis said.

Ujihara said the damage caused by mercury at the levels present in local fish tend to be things like mild coordination, memory and attention problems things that show up in large studies but may not be noticed by the individuals affected.

They are subtle, very subtle," she said of the effects.

Complicating the issue is the fact that aside from the poisonous contaminants, fish is a healthful food.

Sending a health message that it is OK to eat some fish but not a lot, is more difficult than telling people to not eat fish altogether, Ujihara said.

That challenge was plain Thursday in a crowded room at the Park Village Apartments on Alvarado Avenue in Stockton. Ten Cambodian immigrants, were discussing their fishing and fish-eating habits with May Lynn Tan, a health educator for the California Department of Health Services.

Speaking through a translator, Poeun Phy listed the fish he catches in local waters and eats: catfish, striped bass, sometimes sturgeon."

Later, Tan asks if anyone has seen signs or heard radio or television announcements about the dangers of eating too much fish.

People shake their heads. One man once heard about it from his son, who saw it in the newspaper. Phy said he had once heard something by word of mouth about health dangers. No one else in the room had heard about the warnings.

State officials are trying to change that. Soon, Tan had the group poring over a proposed sign written in languages including Hmong, Spanish, Russian and Cambodian.

Tan asks how they would react to the sign's recommendation they eat striped bass no more than twice a month.

He would find a new place for fishing," said Sophat Sorn, translating another man's comments.

Sorn is director of United Cambodian Families, a tiny Stockton-based social service agency. He has a \$10,000 grant from CALFED to spread the fish-safety gospel among the Cambodian community in San Joaquin County.

Sorn, who grew up in Cambodia, fishing in the muddy waters of rice paddies, said it is sometimes hard to convince immigrants that fish here are dangerous.

And when they see the water here is clear, they say there's nothing wrong with the fish here, this is clean water," Sorn said.

Contact reporter Dana Nichols at 209 546-8295 or dnichols@recordnet.com