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Cold-water fish highest in omega-3 fats

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Since Charlie the Tuna debuted in 1961, the popular fish has weathered a storm of controversy. As canned tuna marks its 100th anniversary, Americans consume more than 1 billion pounds of tuna per year, more than any other type of fish.

All but 1 percent of the world's tuna catch ends up in cans rather than on the sushi bar.

Yellowfin (also called ahi), and skipjack (bonito or aku) make up 95 percent of the canned "light tuna" on the market.

If a label says "white tuna," it can be only albacore, more delicately flavored and lighter in color than "light" tuna.

Bluefin, used for sushi, is widely overfished, says the Monterey Bay Aquarium in its Seafood Watch All Fish List.

Each type of tuna comes with its own set of issues:

Concerned about dolphins? Look for the dolphin -safe logo. Ask for troll- or pole-caught, which does not entangle turtles or dolphins, as do other methods.

Want to increase your omega-3 consumption to boost heart and brain health? Albacore caught in cold waters using troll lines have higher omega-3 fatty acids than their warm-water cousins, says Joyce Nettleton, a dietitian and consultant for American Fishermen's Research Foundation.

"The biggest problem in this country is that we eat too little fish, not too much, and overall everyone would benefit from increasing their fish consumption," says Nettleton, an expert on omega-3 fatty acids. "We don't have anything in the marketplace that has the potential to benefit health the way fatty fish do."

Afraid of mercury contamination? Nearly all fish contain small levels of methylmercury, which, in larger amounts, can damage the developing nervous system. Larger, older fish tend to accumulate more in their flesh. The Food and Drug Administration advises pregnant women, nursing mothers and babies against eating shark, swordfish, king mackerel and tilefish.

The FDA does not list tuna on its consumer advisory regarding mercury in fish, but the Mercury Policy Project is calling for that to change. Pregnant women, women of childbearing age and young children "should steer away from white tuna because it has dramatically higher mercury levels," says the project's executive director, Michael Bender.

Others can safely eat canned tuna once a month, he says.

He criticizes the government for yielding to industry pressures. "WIC programs hand out canned tuna. The federal government is subsidizing the canned-tuna industry and at the same time poisoning low-income populations."

But Nettleton says forthcoming research into mercury in fish has reassured her that canned tuna is safe to eat.

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