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## Scientists surprised to find no mercury damage in teens

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**Jamie Talan**  
NEWSDAY

The women ate fish during pregnancy — lots of it. Their children are now teenagers and show no signs that their high levels of mercury exposure while in the womb led to any problems with intellectual development.

"Everyone on this team was so sure that we would find adverse effects from high levels of mercury," said Philip W. Davidson, professor of pediatrics, environmental medicine and psychiatry at the University of Rochester School of Medicine and Dentistry. "It was a shock. We didn't believe it. The kids are almost 16, and we still have yet to see a problem."

Davidson's work was presented at the American Association for the Advancement of Science meeting in St. Louis. He and colleagues from the Ministry of Health in Seychelles have been following 770 children whose mothers were tested during pregnancy for their exposure to mercury from fish. Women from this group of islands in the western Indian Ocean consume 10 times the fish that Americans do.

The study was designed to test the effects of mercury on the developing fetus and then follow the child to see whether it affected development. The concern was born in the 1950s when a factory in Japan dumped mercury into the water, which led to children born with developmental abnormalities. This was an acute poisoning from massive levels of mercury, but it left open another question: Can lowlevel, chronic mercury exposure be harmful to the developing fetus?

"This is good news," said Conrad Shamlaye, an epidemiologist with the Ministry of Health in Seychelles. "If people ate 10 times the level of fish with no problem, then Americans should not worry about consuming fish."

There continues to be controversy over mercury exposure — both from fish and from man-made pollutants. The Food and Drug Administration has tried to educate the public about the importance of the nutrients in fish while trying to minimize exposure to mercury.

Many environmental groups have advised that pregnant women and children younger than age 6 limit their intake of canned tuna, fresh tuna, swordfish and shark.

Mercury enters the atmosphere and drops into bodies of water. But about 85 percent of the mercury pollution in the United States is caused by power plants that burn coal and incinerators that burn trash that contains mercury.

"We have seen problems in other studies," said Jason Babbie, a senior environmental policy analyst for the New York Public Interest Research Group. "It is incumbent to act on the side of caution."

Davidson said there could be several explanations for the surprising findings. For one thing, the amount of mercury consumed from fish "may be just too low to cause problems," he said. Another possibility: Fish may contain micronutrients that support the developing brain and prevent the potential problems.

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