

Fish are Important for Superior Health (FISH) Project Final Community Summary



Dear FISH Project Community Members,

YOU made FISH a success! Here is the final summary. Thank you again for your continuous support and involvement!

As you may recall, a 2011 study by MDH showed that 10 percent of newborns tested in the North Shore region had mercury above levels of concern in their blood. Too much mercury can cause lasting problems with understanding and learning. The 2011 study results spurred a collaboration in 2013 among Sawtooth Mountain Clinic, Grand Portage Health Service, North Shore Health, Trust Lands Grand Portage Band of Chippewa and the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH), resulting in the Fish are Important for Superior Health (FISH) Project. The FISH Project's goals were to reduce mercury exposure in women in the area and pilot an in-clinic screening for high mercury exposure. Nearly 500 women from Cook County, Grand Portage, and the surrounding area participated in the FISH Project.

"Collaboration between MDH researchers, SMC health care providers, community members and the residents of Grand Portage, established vital and lasting relationships. The commitment of existing and new patients who chose to participate in this study, *together*, created a rich and robust learning environment," said Rita Plourde, CEO of Sawtooth Mountain Clinic.

FISH participants provided information about which fish they ate and how often they ate fish. They received information about healthy diets that included which type (species) of fish to eat and how often they can eat fish. They also had a blood sample analyzed for mercury and healthy fatty acids. Now that the project is complete, all blood samples have been destroyed.

Compared to women in a national study, women in the FISH Project:

- reported eating more fish; and
- had higher fatty acids levels and blood mercury levels. However, only 3% of women (about the same percentage as the national study) had mercury levels above the level of concern (5.8 micrograms per liter).

Mercury levels were lowest in blood collected in the spring and highest in fall samples. Results from FISH support the findings of the 2011 study.

An important finding from the project is that women did not stop eating fish as a result of their participation in the FISH Project. Studies have shown that fish can provide important nutrients that help fetuses and babies develop, as long as they are low in mercury and other contaminants. The fatty acids, vitamins, and minerals in fish are also important for adults.

"Fish and fishing is our history and a strong part of the culture of the communities along the North Shore," said Rita Plourde. "SMC's board of directors and staff appreciate any opportunity to improve the care of our patients and the health of our communities. Together with our patients, we wholeheartedly agreed to do whatever was needed to educate and ultimately reduce mercury exposure in women who

are or may become pregnant, thereby reducing mercury levels in future babies. Now, we know we can eat fish wisely and give birth to healthy babies!”

Some of the women in the FISH project participated in a follow-up clinic visit six months after their initial visit. Changes at the follow-up were positive:

- Participating in the project did not cause women to eat less low-mercury fish; many women said they ate more fish since their initial visit.
- Fatty acid levels did not change.
- Mercury levels were lower at the follow up visit.
- Participants with elevated mercury at the initial visit reduced their consumption of fish species shown to contribute most to higher mercury exposure, such as walleye and lake trout.

On-going education will be incorporated into local efforts as a result of the FISH Project.

- SMC and GPHS clinics will include screening for high mercury in future prenatal visits. (In the FISH Project, using brief questions about fish consumption was shown to be a useful tool to identify potential high mercury exposure and who might benefit from increased fish consumption.)
- Community education and WIC visits will include information about choosing which fish to eat and how often. Learning opportunities may include local events (such as the Grand Portage Health Fair in June) and a mailing to all women ages 18-50 who use GPHS.

Based on findings from the FISH Project and other research, a new brochure and website for MDH’s fish consumption guidelines were developed to reach more women and families with clear, easy-to-understand information. The website Chooseyourfish.org helps people navigate the many fish choices and choose the best ones for women who might become pregnant or who are already pregnant. It also provides tips on how to select and cook fish, including recipes and short videos. Versions of the brochures were designed for the North Shore and Grand Portage communities and will be distributed by FISH Project partners.



We hope you found this community project valuable and rewarding! More information on the FISH Project is at <http://sawtoothmountainclinic.org/fish.php>.

Sincerely,



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