

Avoid This Seafood From Thailand

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✓ Fact Checked

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Fish could be one of the healthiest food sources on the planet when wild-caught and sourced from unpolluted and uncontaminated waters; however, most waterways around the globe are now polluted
- › Fish sourced from Thailand is built on the back of migrant workers who are trafficked and made into slaves to man fishing boats
- › After some cosmetic changes to Thailand's fishing industry, the U.S. Department of State raised Thailand from Tier 3 to Tier 2 Watchlist on the Trafficking of Persons Report to smooth international relations
- › Before purchasing fish, I'll give you strategies to ensure they are sourced as labeled and that they provide you with the health benefits you seek

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In a perfect world, fish may be one of the healthiest food sources on the planet. Rich in omega-3 fats and one of the best dietary sources of vitamin D,¹ eating fatty fish has been associated with lower rates of depression, asthma, cognitive decline, heart disease and improved quality of sleep.

However, as waterways are becoming increasingly polluted with pharmaceutical and toxic waste, fish are also contaminated. Wastewater treatment plants have not been designed to remove pollutants in the water from personal care products or

pharmaceutical waste products. As a result, once flushed down the drain or toilet, these chemicals end up polluting the waterways² and your tap water.³

Although Americans are finding new ways to consume seafood, from tacos to salmon pizza, consumption is still below recommended amounts.⁴ The 2015-2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommend a person eating 2,000 calories per day should eat approximately 8 ounces of seafood per week. Current data suggests Americans are eating well below this amount, averaging 2.7 ounces per week, or slightly more than one-third the recommended amount.⁵

The U.S. Department of Agriculture estimates the reduced consumption could be related to concerns with safety or mislabeling of seafood and fish products, lack of awareness of the health benefits of eating fish and higher retail prices.⁶ But the dangers of eating seafood are not limited only to pollutants and chemical toxicity; there's also the fact that commercial fishing strengthens an industry built on the back of forced labor.⁷

Thailand's Fishing Industry Fueled by Human Trafficking

Migrant fishermen from Thailand's neighboring Southeast Asian countries are made promises and then trafficked into fishing boats where the conditions are deplorable and the workers are unable to leave without being beaten and forced to return to work injured.⁸

Essentially slave workers for the fishing industry, these men from Cambodia and Burma (Myanmar) are prevented from changing employers, are often not paid on time, and usually are paid a minimum wage for long hours doing work no one else will.

According to Thailand's law, migrant workers are not protected by labor laws and are not allowed to form any type of workers union. Following an exposé and international uproar in 2015, these practices landed Thailand on Tier 3, the lowest of the U.S. Department of State Trafficking of Persons Report, along with the Sudan, North Korea and Central African Republic.⁹

Additionally, the European Union issued a “yellow card,” warning Thailand it would face a ban on seafood exports to Europe due to illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing practices.¹⁰

In response, the Thai government issued new ordinances and written regulations for the fishing industry and established some provisions that migrant workers needed legal documents and should be accounted for on crew lists. These changes were weak at best and the results have been even weaker. For instance, under the new system, Human Rights Watch interviews ship captains and owners as well as inspect documents but rarely speaks with the migrant workers.¹¹

The government has also not instituted any effective inspection of boats. The improbable results of a 2015 report revealed not one case of forced labor. Another inspection more recently of nearly 50,000 fishermen did not find a single instance where laws regarding hours, wages, treatment on board ship or other issues had been violated.¹² Brad Adams, director of Human Rights Watch in Asia, commented on the new changes, saying:¹³

“What the report found was that although this military government has taken more positive steps forward than the last, the reforms that have been put in place are still largely cosmetic. Forced labor is routine.

The workers we interviewed described being trafficked on to ships, trapped in jobs they couldn’t leave, physical abuse, lack of food, long hours and awful working conditions. The worst thing for many of them was not being paid – the psychological harm and final indignity was the hardest to bear.”

Change Has Been Mostly Cosmetic

Determination of the level a country is ranked on the Trafficking of Persons Report is based on several factors, including:¹⁴

“First, the extent to which the country is a country of origin, transit, or destination for severe forms of trafficking. Second, the extent to which the

country's government does not meet the TVPA's [Trafficking Victims Protection Act] minimum standards and, in particular, the extent to which officials or government employees have been complicit in severe forms of trafficking.

And third, reasonable measures that the government would need to undertake to be in compliance with the minimum standards."

Following nearly no change to practices in Thailand, the U.S. Department of State upgraded the country from Tier 3 to Tier 2 Watchlist.¹⁵ This upgrade was a move to smooth relations with a military-run government that had all but died after the military seized power in a coup the U.S. openly condemned.¹⁶ Politicians hoped Thailand would improve conditions if they removed the country from the lowest ranking in the report, effectively placing the cart before the horse.

Working within the industry, Steve Trent, executive of the Environmental Justice Foundation, wants the focus of those selling seafood to the consumer to take responsibility for their supply chain, ensuring the products were sourced from chains free from human rights abuses.¹⁷

The Sustainable Seafood Task Force, set up in 2015, consisting of supermarkets, buyers and retailers sourcing seafood from Thailand, was created to make the process transparent and bring accountability to the supply chain. Trent believes the Sustainable Seafood Taskforce has essentially failed in their mission, saying:¹⁸

"There is no shadow of a doubt that widespread and very serious labor violations are continuing throughout the industry. Buyers and retailers have failed comprehensively to play their part in finding a real solution. Never in my career have I seen a process more focused on talking in hotel rooms in Bangkok rather than actually committing to using their influence to create real change.

I challenge any of the retailers selling Thai seafood to consumers to guarantee that products from Thailand are free from human rights abuses and illegal

fishing. They have arguably more power than anyone else and they are failing to use it."

Are Your Fish on Drugs and Filled With Plastic?

A study from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) found 81 of 151 contaminants tested for in Puget Sound off the coast of Washington.¹⁹ Although the toxins, including pharmaceutical drugs and chemicals from personal care products, were in the Sound and in the fish, they were not found in the surrounding waters, suggesting the toxins were bio-accumulating in the fish.

Salmon are one fish considered to be indicators of the condition of their environment. In a study of those living in Puget Sound, researchers discovered 40 contaminants in the flesh of the fish. Some of the drugs were found at levels known to interfere with growth, reproduction and behavior. No one knows exactly how this chemical cocktail affects the fish, especially as they are exposed in combination.

The most common way you are exposed to polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) is by eating contaminated fish, where the chemicals accumulate in the fat tissue.²⁰ The International Agency for Research on Cancer and the Environmental Protection Agency classify PCBs as probably carcinogenic.

According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, commercial PCBs elicit a significant number of health conditions in animal studies, including cancer, immunosuppression, neurotoxicity and reproductive and developmental toxicity.²¹

A long line of pesticides, including the long-banned DDT, are also found at concerning levels in fish off the coast of California.²² Additionally, the fish you eat may also be coming with a side order of microplastic,²³ as 13 metric tons of plastic enter the waterways every year. Scientists are unsure of the effect this may have on those who eat the fish.

Despite the Clean Water Act, which was enacted nearly 40 years ago, there are areas of the U.S. where the water is so contaminated with mercury that residents are warned to

refrain from eating any locally caught fish.²⁴ Furthermore, the fish you're purchasing at the store may not be what's on the label.

Labels May Not Reflect the Truth

Oceana was founded by a group of foundations, including the Pew Charitable Trust, Oak Foundation and Rockefeller Brothers Fund, when the founding organizations discovered no group worked exclusively to protect and restore the oceans.²⁵

Oceana has conducted one of the largest seafood fraud investigations, collecting more than 1,200 samples from 674 retailers in 21 states to determine if the label on the fish was really what the consumer was purchasing.²⁶ Using DNA testing, they found one-third of the samples were mislabeled.

Fish sold as tuna and snapper had the highest rate of mislabeling; only seven of the 120 samples of red snapper was actually red snapper. The data also revealed 59 percent of tuna was not tuna and 84 percent of fish sold as "white tuna" at sushi venues was actually escolar. Also known as oilfish, consuming escolar is associated with acute and serious digestive disturbances.²⁷

The researchers tested fish across the U.S. from Washington State to southern Florida. Pennsylvania had the highest rate of mislabeling at 56 percent, while Seattle, Washington, had the lowest rate at 18 percent.²⁸ Mislabeled fish is not limited to switching types of fish, but also includes mislabeling the source of the seafood. In a subsequent report from Oceana,²⁹ researchers revealed up to 30 percent of the fish you purchase may be misrepresented.³⁰

Shrimp raised in farming operations were labeled "Gulf Shrimp," different species were found in one bag of shrimp, and in one sample of frozen shrimp salad the researchers found aquarium shrimp not meant for human consumption. Today, over 90 percent of shrimp sold are coming from industrial shrimp farming operations off the coast of India, Indonesia, Thailand and Vietnam where regulations are not as strict as the U.S.

Antibiotics are not allowed in shrimp farming, but testing has revealed antibiotics in some imported raw, farmed shrimp and bacteria, suggesting poor hygienic conditions in processing the shrimp.³¹

Shrimp and tuna are two of the most popular types of fish sold in the U.S.³² and potentially three of the more dangerous to your health. In 2015, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) had a record number of import refusals for shrimp. This is when shrimp is tested and found to contain unacceptable contaminants, such as banned antibiotics or elevated levels of toxins.

Farmed Fish Is Not a Healthy Option

At first glance, farming fish may appear to solve the issue of sustainability and overfishing. However, much like other industrial farming operations, fish farms actually increase your health risk and produce fish with inferior nutritional quality. Pollution, disease, toxicity and wastewater runoffs also plague fish farms.

In the effort to grow larger, meatier fish faster and more efficiently, fish are being fed genetically modified corn and soy. However, carnivorous fish require a fish-based diet. To meet these nutritional needs, tiny prey fish, such as anchovies and herring, are being dangerously overfished.

The stated goal of these farming operations, to produce a sustainable source of fish, is actually reducing the number of prey fish necessary to support whales, dolphins, seals, sea lions, penguins and many other species.

Oceana blames the decline in the population of these species on the overfishing of prey fish to support a growing number of financially based fish farming operations.³³ These revenues won't offset the heavy cost to the environment as it is both ecologically and economically unstable.

Kept in cages, solid and nitrogen waste products fall to the sea floor in large concentrations, creating a rich environment for algae blooms and cutting off oxygen supply to the surrounding area. Disease and parasitic outbreaks spread rapidly, and

farmed fish escape into nonnative waters to compete with wild fish for food or breed within their species to reduce the strength of the wild population.³⁴

You likely choose to eat fish to gain the health benefits of animal-based omega-3 fats. It is important to note that factory farmed fish may have up to 50 percent less of these healthy fats than wild-caught fish due to their grain-based diet. Farmed salmon are fatter than wild-caught, but higher in omega-6 fats, which Americans already eat 10 to 20 times more of than they need each day.

Fish and mammals are also capable of feeling pain and stress. Living in close quarters and being slaughtered by evisceration, starvation or asphyxiation not only is inhumane, but affects the quality of the meat harvested that ends up on your table. Aquaculture, or fish farming, is ultimately damaging waterways, fish populations and your health.

What Are Your Best Fish and Seafood Choices?

Salmon labeled “Alaskan” cannot be farmed. Alaska does an incredible job at protecting their brand integrity when it comes to seafood, in addition to ensuring quality and sustainability. If you don't see the “Alaska” label or a logo from the Marine Stewardship Council, the salmon is likely farmed.

While seafood may be contaminated with a number of different chemicals, one that causes significant harm to your health is mercury, and these levels can vary more than a hundredfold from one species of fish to another. In one study,³⁵ researchers quantified contributions to the total amount of mercury from 51 different varieties and found tuna was responsible for more than one-third of Americans’ total exposure to methylmercury.

The Mercury Policy Project’s Guide³⁶ is a handy, printable reference of mercury levels in different varieties of fish and seafood. Tuna, snapper and halibut sampled in Washington State markets and Puget Sound top the list of fish containing the most mercury and PCBs. Among the safest fish in terms of contamination and healthy omega-3 fat are those closest to the bottom of the food chain and wild-caught Alaskan and sockeye salmon.

Neither species of salmon are allowed to be farmed and are therefore always wild-caught. The risk of bioaccumulation of toxins and mercury in sockeye salmon is lower than other fish as they have a short life cycle of only three years. Bioaccumulation is also reduced since it doesn't feed on other contaminated fish.

The two designations you want to look for on the label are: "Alaskan salmon" (or wild Alaskan salmon) and "Sockeye salmon." Canned salmon labeled "Alaskan salmon" is a less expensive alternative to salmon fillets.

Other choices of fish close to the bottom of the food chain include sardines, anchovies and herring. Canned tuna, mackerel, swordfish, grouper, marlin and orange roughy have some of the highest levels of mercury. For more information about mercury in fish, I recommend reviewing the Mercury Policy Project's website, [Mercury and Fish: The Facts](#).

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