

**FAQs for Updated Consumption Advice for Striped Bass and Bluefish**  
*Prepared by Maine Center for Disease Control*  
*Environmental and Occupational Health Program*

**What is the new advisory?**

Health officials advise that striped bass and bluefish caught in Maine waters should not be eaten by pregnant women, women of childbearing age, nursing mothers and children under the age of eight. The remainder of the general population should not eat more than four (4) meals per year.

**How is this advisory different than the current advisory?**

The current advisory, issued in 2000, recommended people eat no more than two (2) meals per month for striped bass and bluefish. This advice was based on measured levels of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) in these two species ranging from 10 to 50 parts per billion (ppb) in tissue samples collected between 1995 and 1999.

**Why is Maine changing its advisory now?**

The new advisory is based on several years of more recent data that have consistently shown PCB levels to be substantially higher (levels of 200 to 600 ppb) than those reported before the year 2000. Maine's updated advisory stems from a multi-state report finalized in 2008 by the Eastern Coastal Striped Bass and Bluefish Consumption Advisory Workgroup. This report documents that PCB levels are similarly high or higher in striped bass and bluefish collected in coastal and intertidal waters of other states within the northern Atlantic coastal area.<sup>1</sup>

**What are PCBs and why should I be concerned about them?**

PCBs are a class of chemicals that are very persistent in the environment and, even though they have been banned for over 30 years, they are still found in at levels of concern in some species of fish – for example striped bass and bluefish. These chemicals are very fat soluble and build up in the fatty tissue of fish. There is an especially toxic group of PCBs called “coplanar PCBs”. Health endpoints of concern associated with PCBs are reproductive and developmental effects, hence the specific advice that pregnant women, women of childbearing age, nursing mothers and children under age 8 should not consume striped bass and bluefish. Because PCBs are also classified as carcinogens, the advice for the general population is based on a minimal increase in cancer risk.

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<sup>1</sup> We do not have a definite explanation for why the data between 1995 – 1999 were consistently found to have lower PCB levels in striped bass and bluefish as compared to data post 2000. After 2000, we changed laboratories used for performing PCB analyses. We had split samples analyzed by both the prior laboratory and the new laboratory that indicated levels reported previously reported were on average 3-fold lower. We have since confirmed the high levels with yet a different certified commercial laboratory. Recent data are more consistent with levels reported by other states which would be expected for this migratory species.

## **Where do PCBs come from?**

PCBs are man-made chemicals that were manufactured in the United States until 1977. Because they do not burn easily and are good insulators, they were widely used as coolants and lubricants in transformers, capacitors, and other electrical equipment (refrigerators, televisions, and other appliances). PCBs have entered the environment by accidental spills and leaks during the transport of the chemicals, from fires in PCB-containing electrical equipment, and by the landfilling or illegal disposal of PCB-containing waste materials or discarded electrical equipment.

PCBs get into striped bass and bluefish because they are predatory and eat other fish. East Coast oceanic migratory striped bass spawn in estuaries along the coast – especially in the Hudson River, Delaware Bay, Chesapeake Bay and Roanoke/Albermarle Sound (NC). The Hudson River has historically had a severe PCB contamination problem. Other locations in the mid-Atlantic also have PCB contamination although less so than the Hudson River. There is believed to be a small spawning population of striped bass in the Kennebec River. Generally speaking, striped bass from the Hudson River have the highest concentrations of PCBs, followed by striped bass from Delaware Bay and the mid-Atlantic, followed by the Chesapeake Bay followed by North Carolina. As adult female striped bass migrate north a Maine angler may be capturing fish from any of these populations over time. This may explain some of the variation we see from year to year in PCB concentrations in sampled fish.

The same is roughly true of bluefish. However, the PCB concentration in bluefish has less to do with where they spawn and more to do with the fact that they are very predatory and high in fat. Bluefish in Maine represent a mix of fish that migrate up and down the coast.

There are farm raised striped bass found in the market (which would dilute any average exposure).

## **What about PCB levels in other marine species including shellfish?**

There are many other marine species that are low in PCBs and can be eaten more frequently. Commonly eaten marine species low in PCBs and other contaminants include Atlantic Mackerel, Cod, Haddock, Hake, Pollock, shellfish, shrimp, wild salmon, and lobster (except for the tomalley which should not be eaten).

## **What is the Eastern Coastal Striped Bass and Bluefish Consumption Advisory Workgroup?**

The Eastern Coastal Striped Bass and Bluefish Consumption Advisory Workgroup (i.e., the Interstate Workgroup) was formed in 2006 to explore the possibility of the Atlantic coastal states developing a joint consumption advisory for recreationally-caught striped bass and bluefish based on PCB tissue data collected by all of the Atlantic Coastal states.

As a culmination of the work performed over the past few years, the Interstate Workgroup organized the coordinated release of revised striped bass and bluefish consumption advisories by a number of northeast states, including Maine. Based on the data review, the Interstate Workgroup proposed a “no-consumption” advisory for striped bass and bluefish for women who may get pregnant and young girls, one (1) striped bass meal per month for the general population, and one (1) bluefish meal every other month for the general population. Maine’s revised advisory is more restrictive for the general population based on data available for “coplanar PCBs” (the especially toxic PCBs) which the Interstate Workgroup did not evaluate as part of their effort.

**How do I get a copy of their report?**

The final report of the Interstate Workgroup can be found on the internet at <http://www.maine.gov/dhhs/eohp/fish/PCBSTBhome.htm>.