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## Costco to warn customers of seafood hazard

Decision is meant to help educate customers

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Costco Wholesale Corp. has agreed to post signs at its seafood counters that warn shoppers about the hazards of eating fish tainted with mercury.

In the debate over whether to risk scaring customers away from fish, which is a healthy food, or sharing government advice with consumers, Costco has landed on the side of providing more information. The signs warn children and potential mothers to avoid swordfish, shark, king mackerel and tilefish. They also advise limiting tuna consumption and warn of the risks of eating raw oysters, clams and mussels. But the signs also say that fish and shellfish are part of a healthy diet.

In posting such a warning, the Issaquah-based wholesale club chain joins grocers including Safeway, Trader Joe's, Albertsons, Whole Foods and Kroger, which owns QFC. Chains including Wal-Mart, Publix, ShopRite and Winn-Dixie do not post signs, according to Oceana, a Washington, D.C.-based conservation group that is pushing grocery chains to warn shoppers about mercury.

About 36 percent of major U.S. grocery store chains carry signs to warn consumers about mercury levels in fish. In Washington, 95 percent of the stores post signs – the highest percentage in the nation. Meanwhile, in other states fewer than 2 percent of stores have warning signs posted, according to an Oceana report released Thursday.

Proponents of the signs say that they help consumers make healthy decisions.

"I would be surprised if the average shopper in Seattle knew which fish to avoid. It's hard to keep them straight," said Jackie Savitz, senior campaign director for Oceana's pollution programs. "That, importantly, does *not* mean you can't eat fish. We think fish is an important part of the diet, and you can actually get the benefits of fish without the risk by choosing low-mercury fish."

A scan of the literature reveals that expert advice regarding seafood generally boils down to: "You must eat fish to be healthy! But not too much, or you will harm your children!"

The Food and Drug Administration and the Environmental Protection Agency advise women who are pregnant or nursing to avoid high-mercury fish. The warning extends to all women who are able to bear children, to protect fetuses in a potential pregnancy.

However, fish and shellfish are good for the heart – high in protein and omega-3 fatty acids and low in saturated fat. Nearly all varieties have some mercury, and some species have higher mercury levels than others, according to the FDA. Mercury accumulates in the body and in large quantities can harm a child's nervous system.

Costco operates nearly 400 warehouses in the United States, and its hottest seafood sellers are salmon and shrimp. Costco sells few species that are known to have higher mercury concentrations than other species. It sells tuna and frozen swordfish in limited locations.

The company already had mercury warning signs posted in California because a law there requires it. In Florida, Costco posted a shellfish warning that has been incorporated into the nationwide signs.

Costco leaders were attending a leadership conference Thursday and were unavailable for comment.

"Companies have not been totally jumping up and down saying, 'Yes, yes, we'll do it,' " Savitz said. "It took two years to get them (Costco) to agree to do it. What we're seeing is an increasing trend. It's becoming an industry standard."

Though mercury warning signs in grocery stores help consumers to protect themselves, they don't really solve the overall problem, said Catherine O'Neill, environmental law and policy expert at Seattle University School of Law

"We spend a lot of time on risk avoidance, to stop people from eating fish," she said. "We really need to be preventing mercury contamination in the first place and cleaning it up."

## **GOVERNMENT SEAFOOD ADVISORY**

Fish and shellfish can be an important part of a healthy diet. Nearly all fish and shellfish, however, contain some amount of mercury and related compounds.

Thus the Food and Drug Administration and the Environmental Protection Agency advise pregnant and nursing women, women who may become pregnant and children to limit their weekly consumption of fish and to avoid swordfish, shark, king mackerel and tilefish.

Eat up to 12 ounces weekly of fish that are lower in mercury, such as salmon, pollock, shrimp and scallops. The FDA also advises that women of childbearing age and children limit consumption of albacore tuna and tuna steaks to 6 ounces or less a week.

Serve young children smaller portions of fish and shellfish.

For more information about mercury and other risks concerning seafood consult your doctor or the following sites: [epa.gov/waterscience/fish](http://epa.gov/waterscience/fish) and [www.cfsan.fda.gov](http://www.cfsan.fda.gov). Or call the FDA toll free at 888-723-3366.

There is also a risk associated with eating raw oysters, clams and mussels.

If you suffer from chronic illness of the liver, stomach or blood, or have immune disorders, do not eat these products raw.

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