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The Use of Traditional Foods in a Healthy Diet in Alaska:
Risks in Perspective

The Alaska Division of Public Health recommends the continued unrestricted consumption of traditional subsistence foods in Alaska. Traditional foods provide inexpensive and readily available nutrients, essential fatty acids, antioxidants, calories and protein and many health benefits such as protection from diabetes, cardiovascular disease, improved maternal nutrition, and neonatal and infant brain development.

Presence of heavy metals and persistent, man-made chemicals in the arctic food chain generated concerns about the potential threat to the ecosystem and risk to human health. The global distribution of man-made pollutants through atmospheric transport is well documented; human exposures to them in the arctic occur primarily through the subsistence diet. Global policies to minimize the entry of anthropogenic pollutants into the environment and food chain should be pursued.

The subsistence lifestyle and diet are of great importance to the self-definition, self-determination, cultural and socio-economic, and overall health and well-being of indigenous peoples. At the Tenth International Congress on Circumpolar Health in May 1996, elders called for a balanced approach to evaluating the possible risks and weighing the benefits of subsistence foods to ensure the preservation of their cultural identity and total health and well-being. Elders also expressed that the fear associated with the contaminants may cause greater harm than the actual presence of the contaminants themselves and that health warnings regarding food consumption should only be made when there is strong evidence that the risks outweigh the benefits.

Severely limiting the consumption of traditional foods may result in harm by reducing the consumption of food that has health benefits and by increasing the consumption of foods that have potential health risks. While risk assessments may be valuable in regulating industrial emissions or in establishing site-specific clean up levels, food consumption advice should occur within a broader public health context that includes consideration of both risks and benefits.

The Alaska Division of Public Health bases its recommendations on a thorough evaluation of existing scientific evidence about the potential risks from exposure to naturally occurring and anthropogenic heavy metals and anthropogenic persistent organic chemicals as well as consideration of the uncertainties in risk, the potential health benefits from consumption of traditional foods, the competing risks associated with other food sources, the potential medical impact of dietary and lifestyle changes on a population, and the social and economic ramifications of restricting traditional food consumption.

The goal of the Alaska Division of Public Health is to provide accurate advice based upon the best and most current scientific evidence. Ultimately our goal is to provide a clear explanation of the scientific evidence and our interpretation of that evidence so that each individual can with confidence make a wise decision about what foods he or she will eat. To achieve this goal, we are committed to participate in an ongoing effort to develop appropriate information in partnership with local communities. Improved communication will enable broader understanding of these complex scientific issues.

One of the important benefits of this project is the identification of needed future research. Many gaps in data and knowledge exist. We have exciting opportunities to improve our knowledge and answer lingering questions. By working together, we can help assure a healthy environment for future generations.

A detailed monograph is available from the Section of Epidemiology. You may request a copy by telephone 907-269-8000 or by fax 907-561-6588. Visit our website at <http://www.epi.hss.state.ak.us>.