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John: Welcome to another EPA Region 2 podcast, part of a series of conversations about environmental issues in New Jersey, New York, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. My name is John Senn. This podcast discusses how New Yorkers can make healthy choices when purchasing and consuming fish. The podcast features Maureen O'Neill, an EPA Children's Health Expert, and Dr. Wendy McKelvey, an environmental epidemiologist with the City of New York's Department of Health.

Maureen: Hi, I'm Maureen O'Neill from the Environmental Protection Agency and I work on children's environmental health here. And I've got Dr. Wendy McKelvey with us today. Wendy is an environmental epidemiologist which means she does research on environmental issues at New York City Department of Health. One of the things they've done recently is to come up with some very interesting research and a brochure on fish and how New Yorkers can be healthy. So Wendy, tell us a little bit about the brochure and why you came up with it.

Wendy: Ok. Well in 2004 New York City did a health and nutrition survey and as part of the survey we found that New Yorkers had higher mercury levels than the rest of the country. The explanation for this is fish consumption. So we felt we needed to provide New Yorkers with a brochure, some educational material, to guide selecting fish that are low in mercury. Specifically for highest risk people and those are pregnant and breast feeding women and young children.

Maureen: And why are they at the highest risk?

Wendy: Mercury is toxic to the central nervous system, the brain, and children are especially sensitive. Mercury can cause learning problems in children, and especially those exposed in utero when their moms, the pregnant women, eat fish that are high in mercury.

Maureen: So if I'm a mom and I want to be healthy and I want to make sure that my kids are healthy, and I know that some fish have high omega-3's, and you can eat fish and be a healthy person, which fish would you suggest?

Wendy: Well in our brochure we give a list of many species and rank them according to mercury level. The lowest in mercury are fish like salmon and sardines, anchovies, tilapia, shrimp. Flounder and sole are also good choices. And the ones that are highest in mercury are the shark and swordfish and fresh tuna steaks, Chilean sea bass. Again, you can get this list on our brochure and take it with you so that you can use it as a guide when you shop.

Maureen: One of the many things that's helpful about this brochure is that there are pictures on there too so there's good advice and there's pictures and it's something that actually could be folded up and put in a pocket or purse to take to the stores. Tell me a little bit about the groups that you think are at highest risk in New York because of the work that you did.

Wendy: In our survey we found that certain groups had especially high levels of mercury in their blood and the Asian populations that consume fish frequently were some, and also people of higher socioeconomic status who tend to choose the fish that are highest in mercury, the swordfish and sushi-grade tuna. They also had higher levels so they have to be careful in how they choose their fish.

Maureen: If I want to get a copy of the brochure because it's hard to remember all these different types of fish and which ones are the best choices, where would I get a copy of the brochure?

Wendy: You can call our New York City Hotline, 311 and request the brochure which is called "Eat Fish, Choose Wisely." You can also go to our website at nyc.gov/health and print out a copy.

Maureen: One of the many things that's terrific about the work that New York City did is the fact that it is localized for New Yorkers and since there's 8 million New Yorkers, there's quite a few. The Environmental Protection Agency and the Food and Drug Administration have a joint advisory out on commercial fish that's available, but it is for the nation and what New York City Department of Health has done, which is very groundbreaking, is to do this on a local level. So congratulations to you and the health department for the work you've done.

Wendy: Thank you.

John: This concludes our podcast. Thanks for listening. Please visit us online at epa.gov/region2 for more information on what you heard about today and other environmental issues in New Jersey, New York, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands.