

COMMON SENSE APPROACH TO HEALTH RISKS

Are you concerned about your risk for cancer? Results just released show that dioxins are present in our Oakland Bay. Some would say that dioxins increase our risk for cancer. What does the presence of dioxins in Oakland Bay mean for our health?

Mason County health officials and residents, the Squaxin Island tribe along with state and federal agencies, other organizations and businesses have been working diligently to keep Oakland Bay clean and open to shellfish harvesting. This latest development has everyone taking a moment to evaluate how we are doing and assess our health risk.

Dioxins are produced when things are burned: industrial burning, natural forest fires, fireplace or wood stoves, burn barrels and sometimes during chemical or paper manufacturing. Dioxins are released into the air or water, stick to soil and sediment particles and break down very, very slowly. Therefore dioxins are everywhere. They are a byproduct of human activity.

People are primarily exposed to low levels of dioxins through the food we eat, specifically from fatty animal tissue. Over our lifetime, the dioxins are concentrated in our fatty tissues and this buildup might increase the risk for certain cancers. Clams, mussels and oysters are low in fat and don't store dioxins like meat, dairy products and fatty fish do.

The thought of increasing our cancer risk is always scary. There are risks we have that cannot change: our family history or genetics, our gender or race. Behavior choices we make can increase our risk of cancer: for example, choosing to use tobacco. Exposure to chemicals and toxic agents can be avoidable to some extent. However, with dioxins being present everywhere—in our food, water and air—they are difficult to avoid without living in a bubble.

The amount of dioxins found in Oakland Bay ranges from about 4 parts per trillion to 54 parts per trillion. This amount is very small and is not likely to increase our cancer risk—whether we use the waters recreationally, gather or eat the shellfish, walk along the shoreline or enjoy the view.

The state Department of Health is organizing some sampling of shellfish tissue to figure out how much dioxin is present in shellfish meat. Previous health consultations done in other areas around Puget Sound with similar dioxin levels in sediment have not identified added health risks from consuming shellfish.

If you want to stay healthy and reduce your cancer risk: stay physically active, eat a well balanced diet, and avoid unnecessary chemical exposures. If you smoke, quit now. If you do not smoke, don't start. That decision alone will decrease your cancer risk the most.

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