Fish from open Gulf areas safe, for now

Should I be concerned about buying fish or seafood? I'm worried it might be from the Gulf of Mexico and tainted from the oil spill.

The fishing areas affected by the spill have been closed, and authorities ranging from the Food and Drug Administration, the National Marine Fisheries Service, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention assure consumers that any fish or seafood available in stores is from non-closed areas and is safe for consumption.

Still, you're far from alone in your concern. An ongoing weekly consumer confidence survey conducted by the University of Minnesota's Food Industry Center and the Louisiana State University AgCenter recently reported that 89 percent of respondents reported at least some concern about the effects of the spill on Gulf seafood, and 50 percent were "extremely" concerned. More than half (54 percent) of the respondents said the oil spill has had some impact on their consumption of seafood, with 44 percent of that group reporting that they will only eat seafood that they know does not come from the Gulf of Mexico, and another 31 percent saying they plan to eat less seafood, period.

Despite consumer concerns, a new advisory from the CDC reassures even pregnant women that consuming fish and seafood is as safe as it ever was. Several years ago, concerns about mercury spurred recommendations for pregnant women to limit consumption of fish and shellfish to 12 ounces per week, and to avoid certain fish altogether during pregnancy (shark, swordfish, king mackerel and tilefish). However, the oil spill in the Gulf has resulted in no new advisories.

Still, some researchers are concerned about contamination that is beginning to appear in lower-food-chain wildlife, such as 2-millimeter-sized blue crabs, and the effect it eventually might have on up the food chain. The CDC and other agencies monitoring the situation will notify the public if harmful levels of chemicals are found in Gulf-area seafood.

In the meantime, you can keep up-to-date on the issue by visiting the FDA's seafood website at http://www.fda.gov/Food/FoodSafety/Product-SpecificInformation/Seafood/ and clicking on "Gulf of Mexico Oil Spill Update." Or, you can call the FDA toll-free at 1-888-INFO-FDA with questions or concerns or to report any seafood you've purchased that you suspect is contaminated.

In addition, Auburn University in Alabama has an Oil Spill Blog with analysis and recommendations on a wide variety of aspects of the oil spill, including food safety. To read it, go to http://www.auburn.edu/research/oilspillblog/.

Chow Line is a service of Ohio State University Extension and the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center. Send questions to Chow Line, c/o Martha Filipic, 2021 Coffey Road, Columbus, OH, 43210-1044, or filipic.3@cfaes.osu.edu.