5 Reasons to Avoid Factory-Farmed Fish

(DrFrankLipman – Frank Lipman) While it may seem like a modern invention, "aquaculture," has been around for ages – man has been "farming" fish in net enclosures, ponds, vats, urns and even woven baskets for thousands of years. More recently though, say within the last few decades, worldwide demand has exploded and farming fish has grown just as rapidly, evolving into a multi-billion dollar industry. Its mission: to produce more fish quicker, faster, larger and cheaper to meet the insatiable demand for what once seemed a limitless and inexpensive source of protein and good fat.

Not surprisingly, the extraordinary growth of the fish farm business has brought with it a number of industrial farming problems that concern me enough to advise all my patients to avoid factory-farmed fish. While there are some fish farmers producing eco-friendly and healthy fish, they are the exception, not the rule, so unless you're able to purchase fish from those types of purveyors (usually smaller-scale, artisanal or boutique-style fish farms), ***just say No Tanks…that is, no to farmed fish*** – and here are five simple reasons why:

1) There's no such thing as a free-range, farmed fish

In fact, it's quite the opposite, with fish farm enclosures packing the creatures in, well, like sardines, leaving little room for the fish to swim freely or to engage in their normal behavioral patterns. The result? Stressed fish, who like us, tend to get sick more easily when their defenses are down. With their immune systems compromised, the fish become more prone to illness, parasitic infections and diseases, which

then can spread quickly through their over-populated aquatic quarters.

2) Farmed fish are like really into drugs, dude

Next, the sickened fish have to be made well again, with you guessed it, drugs. To do this, farmed fish are fed antibiotics, antifungals and/or pesticides – which means so are you, with every fork-full. Hardly an appetizing thought. As if that weren't enough, farmed fish are often injected with booster shots of sex hormones. Turns out, captive fish populations tend to produce fewer offspring, so fish farms often enhance Mother Nature with fertility treatments (i.e., hormone shots, special feed, etc.) to stimulate offspring production and pump up the yield. With this in mind the question becomes, what are those fish hormones doing to our bodies? And is it worth the risk? I don't think so.

3) Their diet is simply revolting

As is the case with industrially farmed, land-based livestock, top quality, 5-star feed isn't on the menu, so what does the average farmed fish eat? Mostly fishmeal. Sound innocuous enough, that is till you discover that fishmeal is made up mostly of smaller fish mixed with (presumably genetically-modified) soybeans, grains and corn. Possible GMO issues aside, the larger issue is that in order to make all that fishmeal, a tremendous amount of smaller fish are fished out of the sea – anywhere from 3-to-6 pounds of small fish are needed to produce just one pound of farmed fish. In addition to being an enormously wasteful process, it also leaves less food available for wild fish to feed on, which contributes to their population declines. Oh, and what else do farmed fish snack on? The carcasses of deceased neighbors floating in or lying at the bottom of their tanks. It's not a pretty picture.

4) If you're looking for nutrition, farmed fish falls short

Even if you could overlook the drugs, hormone shots and less-than-optimal diet, farmed fish still comes up short in terms of nutrition, one of the reasons so many of us turned to fish in the first place. Compared to wild fish, farmed versions can have as much as 20% less protein, twice as much inflammation-boosting omega 6 fatty acid, less usable omega 3's and fewer nutrients overall. In short, wild is better.

5) Industrial fish farms pollute their surroundings

Numerous studies report that water quality suffers in areas where fish farms operate, creating something akin to the aquatic version of agricultural run-off. Decaying fishmeal, diseased and dying fish and their waste products combine to create conditions that enable bacteria to flourish, polluting not only the fish farm waters but seeping into and damaging neighboring wild fish habitats, marshes and wetlands either by accident, carelessness or poor fish farming methods. Isn't all this damage and pollution is too high an ecological price to pay for farmed fish-on-demand? I believe it is.

So, with all this in mind, what's the alternative to farmed fish? The answer is wild fish though the wild stuff is not without its own set of issues, including over-fishing, dwindling populations and mercury concerns. To help you make the best possible choices, when buying fish at the market or dining out, ask questions and find out where your fish is sourced, and if it's fished sustainably. Before you buy, check your choices with the Blue Ocean Institute's helpful ***Guide to Ocean Friendly Seafood*** or download printable lists of eco-friendly seafood recommendations from **Seafoodwatch.org**

For more on how to make informed seafood choices, check out **School Yourself the Smart Way to Eat Fish**.