Enjoy your Catch at Its Best

Fish are fun to catch and nutritious to eat. They are high in protein, rich in vitamins and minerals, and low in saturated fat. Fish oils are high in polyunsaturated fats that may function in lowering blood cholesterol.

A 3½-ounce portion of fish (before cooking) provides about half of the daily adult protein requirement and has, depending on the species of fish, only 100 to 150 calories.

Proper handling of fish from the time you catch them until you get them to the table will help maintain optimum eating quality. Keep the following fish handling tips in mind.
CARE ON THE WATER

■ Keep fish alive as long as possible.
Fish flesh is very perishable.
  • A metal ink basket or live box is best. A
    stringer can damage the flesh and increase
    chances of bacterial contamination.
  • If the water is warm, place the fish on ice or
    keep them in cool water.
  • Don’t toss fish into the bottom of the boat
    where they will dry out or where their flesh
    may become bruised and susceptible to
    contamination.
  • Keep fish out of sunlight and direct heat.

■ During winter fishing trips, keep fish
covered to prevent them from freezing
and drying out.
  • For optimal eating quality, fish should not be
    frozen by throwing them out onto the ice.
  • Put fish in an ice chest or styrofoam cooler
    to prevent freezing and dehydration. Clean
    them prior to freezing.

■ Check fish for signs of disease or
parasites.
  • A healthy fish should have firm flesh with no
    signs of discoloration/browning, a mild fresh
    smell, bright clear eyes and red gills.
  • A diseased fish may have sunken eyes or
    “pop-eyes,” discolored skin, loose scales,
    open wounds or gills that are white and
    slimy or bloody.
  • In some cases, the fish is edible if the
diseased area is removed. Fish should be
    thoroughly cooked.
  • After removing the usable flesh, do not
    throw the remains back in the water.
    Dispose of them properly.

CARE IN CLEANING
AND STORAGE

■ Clean and cool fish as soon as possible.
Time and heat can rob freshness and flavor.
  • Fish spoil rapidly due to their
    strong digestive juices. If fish are
    not cleaned promptly, off flavors
    may develop.
  • You will need a sharp knife, a clean
    towel or paper towels (to wipe
    the fish after rinsing), plastic bags
    and crushed ice in an ice chest.
  • Use a clean fillet knife to clean the
    fish. Bleed the fish. Cut the throat
    as you would any game animal, and
    remove the gills and entrails. Wipe
    the surface of the fish with a clean
    cloth or paper towel, put the fish
    in a plastic bag, and put on ice.
  • Decide on the fate of the fish immediately. If
    you do not want them, release them right away
    instead of waiting to decide at the end of the
day, when they may have a reduced chance for
    survival.
  • Check with your local game and fish represen-
tative if you find abnormal growths in the flesh.

■ Fish in safe waters.
  • Some waters may be contaminated by pesti-
cides or other substances. For information on
the safety of fishing waters, contact your local
health department.
  • Contaminants are concentrated in the fatty
parts of the fish. To reduce your risk of
    consuming contaminants, remove the skin and
    fat deposits when you clean fish, or use fillets
    instead of whole fish. Choose a cooking method
    that removes additional fat, such as baking,
    broiling or charbroiling.

■ Non-contaminated. Clean the knife
after each use.
  • When you clean fish at home, wash your hands,
    the knife and the cutting board with warm
    soapy water after each use.

■ Store cleaned, fresh fish in the refrigerator
at 40 F or lower in a covered container and
use within two days.
  • Fish should be kept moist but not wet.

■ Cleaned fish may be frozen whole or as
fillets.
  • Traditionally, fish have been frozen whole, as
    they come from the water. This practice is not
    recommended, because deterioration may occur,
    and poor eating quality may result.
  • Improperly wrapped frozen fish may become
dehydrated — that is, suffer “freezer burn”—
due to contact with air. This condition nega-
tively affects taste and texture.
  • Divide fish into family-size servings and use
    a plastic cling-type wrap as an inner covering
    and moisture/vapor-proof freezer wrap as an
    outer covering. Bread bags, waxed paper and
    cellophane wraps are poor freezer wraps.
  • Remember to press air from the package to
    help prevent off-flavors or odors characteristic
    of rancidity.
  • If freezer space is available, smaller fish may be
    placed in water in plastic containers, in clean
    wax- or plastic-lined milk containers, and then
    frozen.
  • Label each package with the contents and date.
  • The temperature of the freezer should be 0 F
    or lower. When freezing large amounts of food,
    scatter the packages throughout the freezer so
    the food freezes quickly.

CARE IN PREPARATION
AND PRESERVATION

■ Prepare fish properly. Cook fish until it
flakes with a fork.
  • Don’t cross-contaminate. Keep raw fish and
    cooked fish separate.
  • Thaw fillets in the refrigerator, in the
    microwave or under cold running water.
    Food defrosted in the microwave should
    be cooked immediately. Other thawed fish
    should be used within one to two days.
  • Undercooking fish can be risky, while over-
    cooking can result in an unpalatable product.
  • Fish is generally low in fat and very
    tender. Moist heat cooking methods are
    unnecessary. Methods that develop flavor,
    such as broiling, baking or frying, are
    preferred.

■ Fish may be safely preserved by proper
smoking procedures.
  • After cleaning the fish, cut it into uniform
    pieces. Do not allow fish to stand
    unrefrigerated for more than two hours.
  • Salt is a preservative. Fish must be salted in
    the proper brine solution for an appropriate
    length of time. Generally, soaking the fish in a
    strong brine (1 cup salt/7 cups water) for 1
    hour is adequate.
  • After salting, the fish must be heated to
    an internal temperature of 160 F and held at
    this temperature for at least 30 minutes
    during the smoking cycle.
  • Store smoked fish in the refrigerator if it is
to be used within two weeks.
  • For long-term storage, smoked fish
    should be frozen. It also may be preserved
    by following current pressure canning
    recommendations.