

**In advance of treaty adoption, hair testing shows worldwide exposure to mercury**

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**Wednesday 2 October 2013, Minamata, Japan**--- Just prior to the adoption of a global treaty on mercury [i][i], a new Zero Mercury Working Group [ii][ii] report[iii][iii] highlights the importance of the treaty being ratified as soon as possible to reduce global pollution and exposure to mercury. The treaty is expected be signed next week near Minamata, Japan, where a major mercury poisoning incident was first discovered in the 1950's. [iv][iv]

Civil society organizations from 9 countries – including Tokyo-based Citizens Against Chemicals Pollution – participated in the study in order to ascertain mercury hair levels in women of child bearing age and raise exposure reduction awareness. The study revealed that women in several countries had higher mercury levels, in correlation with fish consumption.

Nearly one-quarter (24%) of the samples exceeded the widely recognized U.S. Environmental Protection Agency guideline of 1 micrograms per gram. In 4 of the countries, a high percentage of women exceeded the threshold, specifically:

- 71% in Japan;
- 64% in Spain;
- 36% in Mauritius; and
- 23% in Côte d'Ivoire.

"The results indicate that the mercury hair levels in Japanese women were significantly higher than the other countries tested," said Dr. Takashi Yorifuji, Associate Professor at Okayama University Graduate School of Environmental and Life Science, Japan. "Risk of adverse health effects in children following in utero methylmercury exposures is well documented and rises as maternal exposure increases."

While most exposure studies have been conducted in developed countries, much less is known about exposures in other regions.

"It's imperative to expand capacity to assess exposure variations worldwide," said Michael Bender, ZMWG International Coordinator. "Hair testing lends itself well to citizen participation, as civil society has special access to local communities. It can also be used to evaluate the Convention's progress in reducing exposure."

In addition to pregnant women, the report identified other populations at potential risk, including:

- populations exposed to local pollution sources;
- coastal populations;
- indigenous peoples;
- fishing communities; and
- heavy fish eaters.

The report notes that the situation from country to country is highly variable and seems to be affected by multiple factors, including amounts and types of fish consumed and family income.

“Governments should measure concentration of mercury in fish and issue advisories especially to protect pregnant women, children and those who eat large quantities of fish,” said Elena Lymberidi-Settimo, EEB/ZMWG International Coordinator.

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[i][i] <http://www.unep.org/hazardoussubstances/MinamataConvention/DiplomaticConference/tabid/105832/Default.aspx>

[ii][ii] <http://www.zeromercury.org>

[iii][iii] [http://www.zeromercury.org/index.php?option=com\\_phocadownload&view=file&id=183%3Aassessing-hair-mercury-levels-of-women-of-childbearing-age-in-9-countries-a-civil-society-pilot-project&Itemid=70](http://www.zeromercury.org/index.php?option=com_phocadownload&view=file&id=183%3Aassessing-hair-mercury-levels-of-women-of-childbearing-age-in-9-countries-a-civil-society-pilot-project&Itemid=70)

[iv][iv] <http://www.einap.org/envdis/Minamata.html>