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## Gulf Seafood: How Safe Is It?

Fish with skin lesions have prompted concern about lingering oil spill effects.

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(Photo: Ian West/Getty Images)

Nearly two years after the Deepwater Horizon disaster began, questions about the safety of Gulf seafood still linger among consumers, perpetuated, in part, by reports and pictures of fish riddled with unexplained skin lesions.

According to researchers from the University of South Florida (USF), there are indeed more sick fish in the vicinity of the original oil spill than elsewhere in the Gulf.

Steve Murawski, endowed chair for the College of Marine Science, USF, tells TakePart that skin lesions and ulcers on fish like red snapper, tile fish and Southern hake were found more than twice as frequently in the area where the spill happened than in fish sampled from further away, along the Florida shelf. The levels of sick fish on the Florida shelf were detected at one percent, while those near the spill were detected at two to five percent.

“We don’t know what the results would have been before the spill. There’s no data,” says Murawski. “There are always some sick fish out there. That’s why we did this study in the scientific way that we did.”

Murawski’s study will be published this spring.

In the meantime, [Food Safety News](#) points to a recent blog post by FDA Deputy Commissioner for Foods Michael Taylor reassuring consumers that seafood taken from the Gulf is safe and thoroughly tested for Polycyclic Aromatic Hydrocarbons (PAHs).

“The best way to understand how safe Gulf seafood is, is to visualize how much seafood you could eat and still not reach levels of concern,” Taylor tells *Food Safety News*.

He’s talking about massive quantities of seafood consumption.

“Someone could eat 63 lbs of peeled shrimp (that’s 1,575 jumbo shrimp); or 5 lbs. of oyster meat (that’s 130 individual oysters); or 9 lbs. of fish (that’s 18 8-ounce fish filets) every day for five years and still not reach the levels of concern,” [writes Taylor on the FDA blog](#).

Murawski agrees.

“I wouldn’t hesitate to eat Gulf seafood. The PAH levels are an order of magnitude below levels we’d need to be concerned about,” he says.

But don’t expect images of sick fish to go away any time soon. According to the *Tampa Bay Times*, laboratory studies of sick fish are beginning to trickle out, and reports of fish with lesions are spreading to nearby areas like Alabama.

“[They] show that chronic exposure to oil and dispersant causes everything from impacts to the genome to compromised immune systems,” James Cowan, an oceanography professor at Louisiana State University, tells the *Tampa Bay Times*. “Similar findings are being found in shrimps and crabs in the same locations.”