

High mercury levels found in women

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WASHINGTON — One-fifth of women of childbearing age have mercury levels in their hair that exceed federal health standards, according to interim results of a nationwide survey being conducted by researchers at the University of North Carolina at Asheville.

The study was commissioned by the environmental advocacy group Greenpeace.

Coal-fired power plants and other sources release mercury into the air, which ends up in water and is absorbed by fish. The pollutant, a neurotoxin that can cause developmental problems in fetuses and young children, makes its way into the human bloodstream when people eat the contaminated fish.

Researchers based their findings on hair samples from nearly 1,500 people, many of whom learned of the study through the Internet. Participants either paid \$25 to submit hair samples with a home testing kit or got free tests at 27 hair salons across the country sponsored by Greenpeace, Aveda salons and state and local environmental groups.

Study participants were not randomly chosen, but the report's author, Richard Maas, said they were evenly distributed geographically and he believes the results reflect overall mercury contamination levels among Americans.

The last major national study of Americans' mercury exposure, conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention from 1999 to 2000, found about 12 percent of women of childbearing age had mercury levels in excess of the EPA's safety standard.

Greenpeace said the survey will be will be used to lobby for stricter curbs