The Gulf of Mexico region produces most of the shrimp, oysters, and crayfish eaten in the U.S. In April 2010, the Deepwater Horizon, an oil rig owned by British Petroleum (BP), exploded in the Gulf, causing an oil leak that lasted for 91 days. This was the largest offshore oil spill in U.S. history. One of the possible results of this catastrophe was the contamination of fish in the Gulf with oil, in particular chemicals in the oil known as polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), which can be carcinogenic.

In the weeks following the oil spill, and around its anniversary, the media sometimes covered the issue of seafood safety, but news articles that focused solely on seafood safety were rare. More often, messages about seafood safety were combined with concerns about economic and environmental effects. The messages were confusing, some emphasizing that the seafood was safe, others expressing concern. The public was provided conflicting information, and there was a paucity of constructive advice about how to manage risk. In addition, media coverage of seafood safety failed to make an explicit connection that ecological disasters (such as the BP Deepwater explosion) can lead to human health risks by impacting the food supply.
Study Summary
Researchers analyzed 315 articles that covered the British Petroleum oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in April 2010, looking specifically for how journalists addressed the issue of seafood safety. (Most of the shrimp, oysters, and crayfish caught in the U.S. come from the Gulf.)

The articles analyzed were selected in the weeks directly following the spill, and during a four-week period surrounding the one-year anniversary of the spill.

Tactics for the Media
• Journalists should consult with public health advisers when reporting on environmental disruption.
• When addressing food safety, articles should offer advice about how to manage risk, in addition to reporting all relevant risk information.
• Coverage of food safety issues should provide context about the food, balancing risk information with information about known health benefits and sources of the food. For example, most of the seafood eaten in the U.S. comes from international sources.

Full Title:
Reassuring or risky? The presentation of seafood safety in the aftermath of the British Petroleum Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill

Abstract available at:
http://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/abs/10.2105/AJPH.2012.301093