



SECTION

3



CARE OF YOUR CATCH

Success! You caught a fish! What you do next is up to you. Some anglers release their fish while others take them home for dinner. The choice is yours.



CATCH AND RELEASE

Many people like to eat the fish they catch. However, many anglers prefer to return some or all of their catch to the water, a practice called “catch and release.” They do this so they can continue to enjoy the sport of fishing throughout their lives and pass on a healthy fishery to future generations. Letting smaller fish grow bigger and releasing larger fish to spawn again helps keep fishing great.

If you decide to practice catch and release, take these simple steps to aid in the survival of the fish you release:

- Quickly play and land your fish. Don't fight it to exhaustion.
- Handle your fish as little as possible and release it quickly. Unhook it in water if possible.
- If you have to take your fish out of the water, handle it carefully to avoid injuring it. Avoid contact with its gills and eyes, and don't squeeze it or remove its protective slime.
- If you are taking pictures, take them quickly and get the fish back in the water as soon as possible.
- When holding a long fish to pose for a picture, hold it horizontally and support its belly as in the above photo. This protects its internal organs.
- Consider using only artificial lures to avoid hooking fish deeply. It's more likely that you'll be moving an artificial lure through the water when you get a strike, making it less likely that the fish will have an opportunity to “swallow the hook.”
- Do not jerk a hook out of a deeply hooked fish. Instead, cut the leader close to the eye of the hook.
- Have the necessary tools to remove hooks, like forceps or needle nosed pliers, in easy reach, so you can rapidly remove the hook.
- Consider using barbless or circle hooks. Circle hooks, when used properly, usually hook the fish in the corner of the mouth.
- Trout become heat stressed when water is 70°F or higher. Avoid catch and release fishing for heat stressed trout, because many will die after they are released.



Just caught a trophy?

Take a picture of the fish and measure its length and girth (measurement around its fattest part) before releasing it. With a photo and your measurements, a taxidermist can produce an accurate, long-lasting, fiberglass replica of your catch. The best part is that you might be able to catch that trophy again, when it's even bigger! Qualifying catches can also be entered into the New York State Angler Achievement Awards Program. To find out more about this popular program, see www.dec.ny.gov/outdoor/7727.html.

KEEPING AND CLEANING YOUR CATCH

Keeping Your Catch

Enjoying a fresh fish meal is a great way to finish a fishing trip. Before keeping your catch, however, make sure your fish is legal to keep by checking the current Freshwater Fishing Regulations Guide.

Keep it Fresh

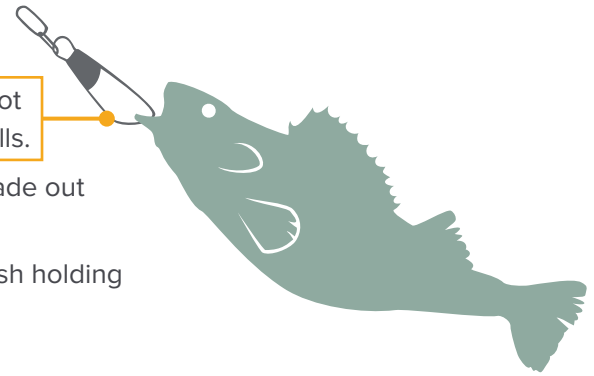
For the best tasting fish, keep your catch fresh from the time it is caught until it is cleaned, cooked or frozen. This can be done either by keeping the fish alive during your trip or by properly preserving it to avoid spoiling.

Wetting your hands before handling a fish helps keep the slime coating on its body.

Keep it Alive

Caught fish can be kept alive in three ways:

- *On a stringer:* When using a stringer, attach fish through the lower jaw not the gills. Fish will die more rapidly if the stringer is placed through the gills.
- *In a mesh fish basket immersed in cool water:* Fish baskets are often made out of steel wire mesh. Use them for smaller fish like sunfish and perch.
- *In an aerated tank:* Fishing boats often have aerated live wells. These fish holding tanks are another great way to keep fish alive and fresh.



Put dead fish on ice ASAP!

- If you cannot keep your catch alive, preserve it on ice until you can clean it. Placing fish in a cooler with ice will help keep them fresh. For the freshest fish, immediately field dress (see page 32) your catch and pack it in ice.

Cleaning Your Catch

When you're done fishing, you have to prepare your catch for cooking or storage. This is called "cleaning" fish. Fish can be cleaned using a number of methods. Filleting and pan dressing are the two most common ways to clean fish. Field dressing is another way to both clean and keep fish fresh until you get them home.

Filleting

Filleting is used to clean a variety of fish species, from larger trout and walleye, to smaller sunfish and perch. The filleting technique shown is one of several different techniques used. This method produces two boneless (or nearly boneless) pieces of meat (fillets), one from each side. All that is needed is a sharp fillet knife and a hard surface, such as a cutting board.

Pike and pickerel have a lot of bones and need special filleting techniques not shown here.

Safety tip: Remember to always move the knife away from yourself while cutting!



1. Begin by laying the fish flat on its side. Make a cut behind the pectoral fin down to, but not through, the backbone.



2. Without removing the knife, turn the blade and cut through the ribcage toward the tail with the knife blade running flat along (but not through) the backbone and just on the up side of the dorsal fin.



3. Stop cutting just before you separate the fillet from the body. While keeping the body in the same position, flip the fillet over with the skin side down.



4. Insert your knife between the flesh and the skin. Holding the knife almost flat and using a back and forth motion, remove fillet from skin.



5. The fillet still contains the ribcage, so use the knife blade to carefully cut around and remove it.



6. Turn the fish over and repeat the previous five steps on the other side for the second fillet.
7. Rinse the fillets with cold, clean water.

Pan Dressing

Pan dressing is a common way to clean smaller fish like sunfish. This technique involves removing the scales (scaling), fins, head and guts of the fish; leaving the meat, skin, backbone and ribs. Almost no meat is lost by using this method. The bones can be easily removed after cooking.



1. Using a scale scraper, or just a butter knife, scrape from tail towards the head, removing scales from both sides of fish.



2. Using a fillet knife, cut ¼- to ½-inch-deep along each side of the dorsal and anal fins for later removal.



3. Hold the fish upside down with its back resting on the table. Cut immediately behind the vent (anus). Slip knife forward just under the skin until you reach the pectoral fin.



4. Lay the fish flat. Make a deep cut on both sides of body behind the pectoral fin without cutting the backbone.



5. Pull the fish's head upward to break its backbone. The head will tear loose and the attached guts, pectoral and pelvic fins will come with it.



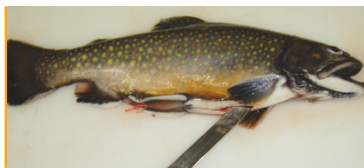
6. Remove the dorsal and anal fins, loosened in step 2, by pulling away and forward from the body (use pliers if needed). Cut off the tail.



7. Rinse with cold, clean water.
8. Ready for cooking!

Field Dressing

Field dressing involves removing the gills and internal organs of the fish "in the field," where you're fishing.



1. Use a knife to make a cut from the vent (anus) to the gill arches. Keep the knife blade shallow to avoid cutting the stomach or intestines.



2. Next, cut the bridge that attaches the gills.



3. Remove the gills and internal organs.



4. Some fish have a long, red kidney that runs along the backbone on the inside of the body cavity. Remove the kidney by scraping it with the knife blade or your thumbnail.



5. Rinse the body cavity with water and pack the fish in a cooler with ice.

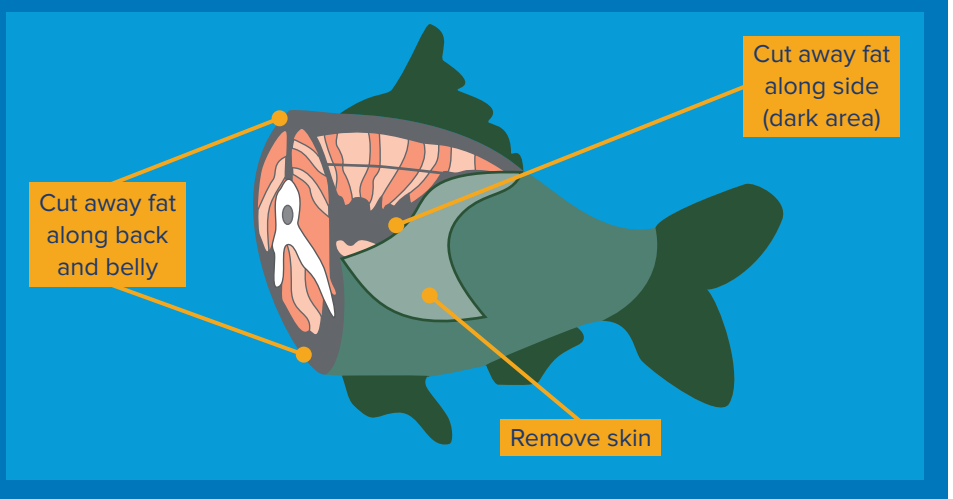
FISH CLEANING LAW

While on the water, walleye, largemouth and smallmouth bass, brook trout, lake trout or Atlantic salmon must be kept whole or field dressed only, leaving the head attached. This allows enforcement officers to measure their length from head to tail. It is illegal to fillet, pan dress, skin or cut these species in any way that prevents their total length from being determined while still on the water.

Other species may be filleted as long as the skin is left on to allow for species identification.

CLEANING FISH FOR HEALTHIER EATING

Chemicals, such as PCBs, dioxin and mirex, can accumulate in the fatty tissue of a fish. You can reduce the amount of some chemicals in a fish meal by properly trimming and skinning your catch. It is recommended to remove the skin and trim fatty areas like the belly flap, the lateral lines along each side, and the fat along the back and under the skin.



STORING AND PREPARING YOUR CATCH

Storing Your Catch

The best tasting fish are those that are freshly caught, cleaned and cooked. Unfortunately, you can't always eat your catch immediately after cleaning. Here's some advice on properly storing fish to maintain its quality.

Refrigeration

Cleaned fish can be kept in the refrigerator for up to two days after being caught and cleaned. The closer the temperature is to freezing (32°F), the better the fish will keep.

Freezing

Freeze your catch if it will not be cooked within two days of being caught and cleaned. The sooner you freeze the fish, the fresher it will taste later on. To prevent freezer burn, wrap the fish tightly with freezer paper, aluminum foil or plastic wrap. After wrapping the fish, place it in a plastic freezer bag and remove as much air as possible.

Another way to preserve your catch is to freeze the fish in water. This method works well for fillets. Place fillets in a plastic freezer bag. Add just enough water to cover the fillets. Remove air from bag and freeze.

Cooking Your Catch

Fish can be an important part of a healthy diet. They are a good source of protein and have fewer calories than other kinds of meat. Most fish are good sources of many essential vitamins and minerals. Eating fish may even reduce the risk of heart disease. However, the best part is that fish are also tasty!

Ways to Cook Fish

Fish is a food that can be cooked in almost any way. The method of cooking often depends on how the fish was cleaned.

Fillets are the most versatile form of fish for various cooking methods. They can be cooked by frying, baking, broiling, smoking or grilling. Countless recipes call for fish fillets.

Smaller pan-dressed fish are often pan fried or deep fried.

Larger field- or pan-dressed fish, like trout and salmon, can be baked, grilled or smoked.

The flesh of properly cooked fish will be white (or light pink for salmon) in color and can be easily flaked with a fork. The fish should be moist and tender with a delicate flavor. Take care to avoid overcooking. This can make the flesh dry and chewy.



Broiling

Broiling is done in an oven broiler, which uses high heat from above to cook. Fillets are placed on a preheated, greased broiler pan. Cook fillets a few inches from the heat for about five to eight minutes, turning once during cooking. The high heat of an oven broiler can dry out fish, especially lean fish like bass, walleye and sunfish. Basting with butter or other sauces helps to keep fish moist and tender.

Baking

Baking is one of the easiest ways to cook fish. Place fillets on a greased, uncovered baking dish or pan. Preheat oven to 350°F, and cook fish for 20-25 minutes. Thin fillets will take less time. Larger dressed fish can take 45-60 minutes. Baste fish with butter, margarine or other sauces to keep it from drying out while baking. Add your favorite spice(s) for extra flavor. When the fish is done, its flesh will flake easily when tested with a fork.

Grilling

Grilling involves cooking fish on a barbeque grill. Thicker fillets, pan-, or field-dressed fish can be grilled. Thinner fillets tend to fall apart when turned over. Fish fillets are cooked over medium to high heat for about six minutes for a half-inch-thick fillet, turned once during cooking. Fish should be brushed with melted butter or marinade and then cooked until meat is white (or pink for salmon) and flaky, but still moist. Grilling times will vary for whole, field-dressed fish or foil-wrapped fish, so consult a cookbook.



Pan Frying

Pan frying is a quick and easy way to cook fillets and pan-dressed fish. Fish are cooked in a frying pan with about ¼-inch of oil at medium-high heat. Pan-fried fish can be cooked plain, but are usually coated with flour, breading or batter before frying. Briefly cook the fillets on each side until golden brown, turning only once.



Tips for Healthier Eating

Overall, fish is a great tasting and healthy food. However, certain species caught from a few waters in New York State contain contaminants that may be harmful to human health. See the “Safe and Responsible Angling” chapter for where to find health advisories on consuming fish, or visit www.health.ny.gov/fish.

RESOURCES

Web Resources

- How to properly catch and release a fish (video)
www.youtube.com/watch?v=TQRGP4dY2rl
- Catching and Releasing Trout
www.dec.ny.gov/outdoor/9224.html
- The Wild Harvest Table
<http://wildharvesttable.com>

Books

New Cleaning & Cooking Fish (The Freshwater Angler) by Sylvia Bashline

ACTIVITIES

1. Catch a fish and release it!

Make sure to use this chapter’s guidelines for catching and releasing a fish. Take a picture if you want to remember your catch.

2. Enter your catch!

If the fish you caught is big enough, enter it in the New York State Angler Achievement Awards Program. You will need its length and a picture too. See, “Just Caught a Trophy?” in this chapter for more information.

3. Eat your catch!

Fish are great to eat. Which way will you clean your fish and which way will you cook it? The choice is yours! See, the “Cleaning Your Catch” and “Cooking Your Catch,” sections in this chapter for some suggestions. Check the Fishing Regulation Guide to be sure your catch is in season and of legal size to keep.