

## Good Fat, Bad Fat: The Facts About Omega-3

Think all dietary fat is the same? Guess again

By Colette Bouchez  
WebMD Weight Loss Clinic

If you ask folks what food group they should avoid, most will probably answer "fats." While it's true that, in large amounts, some types of fat are bad for your health (not to mention your waistline), there are some we simply can't live without.

Among them are the omega-3 fatty acids, found in foods including walnuts, some fruits and vegetables, and coldwater fish such as herring, mackerel, sturgeon, and anchovies.

"It not only plays a vital role in the health of the membrane of every cell in our body, it also helps protect us from a number of key health threats," says Laurie Tansman, MS, RD, CDN, a nutritionist at Mount Sinai Medical Center in New York.

The benefits of omega-3s include reducing the risk of heart disease and stroke while helping to reduce symptoms of hypertension, depression, attention deficient disorder (ADD), joint pain and other rheumatoid problems, as well as certain skin ailments. Some research has even shown that omega-3s can boost the immune system and help protect us from an array of illnesses including Alzheimer's disease.

Just how do omega-3s perform so many health "miracles" in people? One way, experts say, is by encouraging the production of body chemicals that help control inflammation - in the joints, the bloodstream, and the tissues.

### RESOURCE GUIDE

#### The Amazing Omega-3s

By Kathleen Zelman, MPH, RD



The jury is in: Omega-3 fatty acids have amazing health properties, affecting everything from your joints to your heart. And all you need to do is to enjoy a few servings a week of omega-3-rich fish, nuts, seeds, and oils.

Foods rich in omega-3s are also excellent sources of lean protein -- which helps keep you feeling satisfied, making you less likely to overeat. So go ahead, treat yourself to your favorite seafood dish (or try one of the flaxseed recipes in this article).

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But even as important is their ability to reduce the negative impact of yet another essential type of fatty acid known as omega-6s. Found in foods such as eggs, poultry, cereals, vegetable oils, baked goods, and margarine, omega-6s are also considered essential. They support skin health, lower cholesterol, and help make our blood "sticky" so it is able to clot. But when omega-6s aren't balanced with sufficient amounts of omega-3s, problems can ensue.

"When blood is too 'sticky,' it promotes clot formation, and this can increase the risk of heart attack and stroke," says nutritionist Lona Sandon, RD, a spokeswoman for the

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American Dietetic Association. But once you add omega-3s to the mix, the risk of heart problems goes down, she tells WebMD.

The latest research shows that the most promising health effects of essential fatty acids are achieved through a proper balance between omega-3s and omega-6s. The ratio to shoot for, experts say, is roughly 4 parts omega-3s to 1 part omega-6s.

Most of us, they say, come up dangerously short.

"The typical American diet has a ratio of around 20 to 1 -- 20 omega-6's to 1 omega-3 -- and that spells trouble," says Sandon, an assistant professor of nutrition at University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center in Dallas. While reducing your intake of omega-6s can help, getting more omega-3s from food is an even better way to go.

### **How to Get What You Need**

Omega-3 fatty acids are not one single nutrient, but a collection of several, including eicosapentaenic acid (EPA) and docosahexanoic acid (DHA). Both are found in greatest abundance in coldwater fish -- and that, say experts, is one reason so many of us are deficient.

Over the past several years, the Food and Drug Administration and other groups have issued warnings about mercury and other harmful chemicals found in fish. This has led many people to stop eating fish -- a big mistake, Tansman says.

"People have taken the whole FDA advisory out of context including who it's for, which is primarily pregnant women, and small children," she says. Moreover, Tansman says, even if you obey the FDA warnings in the strictest sense, the latest advisory says that up to 12 ounces of a variety of fish each week is safe for everyone. That amount, Tansman reminds us, is roughly half of what we need to get enough omega-3s.

"The recommendation [for omega-3s] is two servings of fish a week," Tansman says. "At 3 to 4 ounces per serving, that's well below the FDA's safe limit of 12 ounces per week."

According to the American Heart Association, those looking to protect their hearts should eat a variety of types of fatty fish (such as salmon, tuna, and mackerel) at least twice a week. Those with heart disease should get 1 gram of omega-3s (containing both EPA and DHA) per day, preferably from fatty fish. About 1.5 ounces of fish contains 1 gram of omega-3s.

But even if you don't like fish (or choose not to eat it), you can still get what you need from dietary sources. WebMD Weight Loss Clinic "Recipe Doctor" Elaine Magee, MPH, RD, says one answer lies in plants rich in omega-3s -- particularly flaxseed.

"It's safe to say this is the most potent plant source of omega-3," says Magee, author of *The Flax Cookbook*. While flaxseed contains no EPA or DHA, Magee says, it's a rich source of another omega-3 known as alpha-linolenic acid (ALA), which the body can use to make EPA and DHA.

Flaxseed is available in health food stores and many supermarkets, sold as whole seeds, ground seeds, or oil. Although flaxseed oil contains ALA, Magee says ground flaxseed is a much better choice because it also contains 3 grams of fiber per tablespoon, as well as healthy phytoestrogens. Other sources of omega-3s include canola oil, broccoli, cantaloupe, kidney beans, spinach, grape leaves, Chinese cabbage, cauliflower, and walnuts.

"About an ounce -- or one handful -- of walnuts have about 2.5 grams of omega-3s," says Sandon. "That's equal to about 3.5 ounces of salmon."

Besides getting more omega-3s, you can also help your heart by replacing some omega-6s from cooking oils with a third fatty acid known as omega-9 (oleonic acid). This is a monounsaturated fat found primarily in olive oil.

Though it is not considered "essential" (the body can make some omega-9), by substituting it for oils rich in omega-6s, you can help restore the balance between omega-3s and omega-6s, plus gain some additional health benefits.

"Factors found in olive oil can also help boost the good cholesterol, which can also help your heart," says Magee.

## Supplements vs. Foods

If you're thinking that maybe the easiest and most low-cal way to get omega-3s is with fish oil capsules, not so fast. Many nutritionists say it's a bad idea.

"There is something about whole food that when it goes into the body it's more than 90% absorbed, while [with] a supplement you absorb only about 50%," says Sandon.

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Moreover, says Sandon, because the components of different foods work together, they may offer a more complete and balanced source of nutrients.

"It could be something more than just the omega-3s in fish that make it so healthy," says Sandon. "It could be the amino acids that provide benefits we are not going to see in fish-oil supplements alone."

And if you're thinking fish-oil capsules will help you avoid the contamination risks of fresh fish, think again. Because supplements are not regulated in the U.S., Sandon says, some may contain concentrated amounts of the same toxins found in fresh fish. And because the oil is so concentrated, the supplements can also produce an unpleasant body odor.

More important, experts say, there is a danger of overdosing on fish-oil supplements, particularly if you take more than the recommended amount. Doing so can increase your risk of bleeding or bruising. This isn't likely to happen when you get your intake from foods.

The one-time fish oil supplements can really help if you need to reduce your levels of triglycerides, a dangerous blood fat linked to heart disease. The American Heart Association recommends that people with extremely high triglycerides get 2 to 4 daily grams of omega-3s (containing EPA and DHA) in capsules -- but only in consultation with their doctors.

"The key here is to never take these supplements without your doctor's consent," says Magee. "This is not something you want to fool with on your own."

SOURCES: Laurie Tansman, MS, RD, nutrition coordinator, Mount Sinai Medical Center, New York; Lona Sandon, RD, spokeswoman, American Dietetic Association; associate professor of nutrition, University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center, Dallas. Elaine Magee, MPH, RD, consultant, WebMD Weight Loss clinic; author, *The Flax Cookbook* (Marlowe and Company), Northern California; American Heart Association Advisory on Omega-3 fatty acids; Food and Drug Administration Advisory on Fish Consumption.

## Heart Healthy Omega-3 Recipes

While adding fish to your diet is an important way to ensure you get enough omega-3s, Magee offers these two recipes to help get you started using flaxseed as well.

Each portion offers 1 gram, a day's supply, of omega-3 fatty acids. Keep in mind that you don't have to get a daily supply of omega-3s, as long as you maintain a weekly intake of 6 grams to 8 grams, your body will have what it needs.

### No-Bake Peanut Butter Power Bars

Journal as: 1 1/2 cereal bar or 1/4 cup granola cereal + 2 teaspoons peanut butter

From *The Flax Cookbook* by Elaine Magee, MPH, RD (Marlowe & Co.)

#### Canola cooking spray

**1 tablespoon butter or canola margarine**

**1/3 cup reduced-fat smooth peanut butter**

**2 cups miniature marshmallows, lightly packed**

**1 cup low-fat granola**

**1 cup Rice Krispies cereal (or other puffed rice cereal)**

**1/3 cup ground golden flaxseed (golden flax works better in this recipe)**

- Coat an 8 x 8-inch baking pan with canola cooking spray. Put the butter, peanut butter, and marshmallows into a medium-sized microwave safe bowl and microwave on high for 30 seconds, or until mixture is just melted. Stir to blend.
- Microwave again briefly if the mixture isn't melted or smooth. Then stir in granola, puffed rice and flaxseed.
- Spread the mixture in the prepared pan, flattening it evenly with a sheet of waxed paper. Let it cool completely before cutting into 8 equal-sized bars.

Yield: 8 bars

Per serving: 207 calories, 5.5 grams protein, 31 grams carbohydrate, 8 grams of fat ( 2 grams saturated fat, 1 gram monounsaturated fat, 1.8 grams polyunsaturated fat) , 4 milligrams cholesterol, 3 grams fiber, 174 milligrams sodium. Calories from fat: 35%. Omega-3 fatty acids = 1 gram, Omega-6 fatty acids = 0.7 gram.

### Mocha-ccino Freeze

Journal as: 1/2 cup regular yogurt sweetened + 1/4 cup whole-grain, unsweetened cereal

From *The Flax Cookbook* by Elaine Magee, MPH, RD (Marlowe & Co.)

**1 cup low-fat vanilla frozen yogurt, light vanilla ice cream or ice milk (nonfat or sugar-free brands can be substituted if desired)**

**1/4 cup low-fat milk**

**1/4 cup strong decaf coffee, chilled (use caffeinated if you prefer). To make double-strength coffee, brew twice the amount you want without increasing the water.**

**1 cup ice cubes**

**2 tablespoons ground flaxseed**

- Add all ingredients to your blender or food processor
- Blend on highest speed until smooth (about 10 seconds). Scrape sides of blender, and blend again for five more seconds.
- Pour into two glasses and enjoy!

Yield: 2 smoothies.

Per serving: 157 calories, 7 grams protein, 23 grams carbohydrate, 4.5 grams fat ( 1.3 saturated fat, 1 grams monounsaturated fat, 1.9 grams polyunsaturated fat), 7 milligrams cholesterol, 2.3 grams fiber, 79 milligrams sodium. Calories from fat: 26%. Omega-3 fatty acids = 1.5 grams. Omega-6 fatty acids = 0.4 gram.