amazing omega-3s

Believe the hype: omega-3s—from fish fats specifically—really are that good for you

By Vera Tweed

Fish fat has gained tremendous popularity because it is the richest source of omega-3 fats. These fats are essential, meaning your body can't make them, and inadequate amounts can kill you. As many as 96,000 people die each year in the United States due to lack of omega-3s in their diets, according to research led by the Harvard School of Public Health and published in the Public Library of Science Medicine journal.

On the other hand, getting sufficient omega-3s offers multiple benefits, including a longer life, overall improved health, a leaner physique, a clearer head, and younger-looking skin. In fact, scientists are discovering that omega-3 fats affect how our genes work.

"The most interesting research occurring in the field of fatty acids, especially omega-3 essential fatty acids, is the concept of human genetic activation by the actions of these important food and supplement products," says Joseph Maroon, MD, professor of neuroscience at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center and author of Fish Oil: The Natural Anti-Inflammatory.

In a nutshell, says Maroon, omega-3s "activate DNA to reduce inflammation, reduce cancer formation, protect from clot formation, and improve nerve cell communications."

Decades of Discovery

The benefits of omega-3 fats were initially identified in the 1970s, when researchers began examining why Greenland's Eskimos, who ate a high-fat diet of oily fish, rarely developed heart disease. Since then, hundreds of studies have validated the therapeutic value of omega-3s. Research compiled by the FDA and the American Heart Association and published in a variety of journals shows that the following are some of the specific benefits of eating oily fish or taking fish oil:

- Reduced risk for heart disease.
- Relief from inflammatory diseases.
- Higher levels of HDL or "good" cholesterol.
- Lower levels of LDL or "bad" cholesterol.
- Lower levels of triglycerides (elevated levels increase health risks).
- Less likelihood of high blood pressure.
- Reduced risk of artery-clogging plaque or blood clots.
- After a heart attack, less risk of sudden death from another heart attack or stroke.
- Improved blood sugar control among people who are overweight.
- Less joint pain and stiffness among people with arthritis.
- Improved bone health.
- Improved mood.
- Less hostility and improved overall function among children with attention deficit or hyperactivity disorders.
- Improved healing of skin conditions such as psoriasis.
- Reduced sensitivity to the sun.
- Reduction of asthma symptoms among children.

product examples (from left)

CARLSON CALA OMEGA are easy-to-swallow omega-3 softgels that support brain, vision, and cardiovascular health.

PARADISE HERBS MED VITA ALPHA OMEGA-3 HIGH EPA/DHA FISH OIL has concentrated EPA/DHA for joint health, cardio function, and more.

NATURAL FACTORS RX-OMEGA-3 FACTORS's stringent quality-control standards ensure this pharmaceutical-grade oil is free from toxic environmental contaminants.

BARLEAN'S OMEGA SWIRL LEMON ZEST gives you all your healthful omega-3s in a refreshing lemon smoothie—no oily, fishy taste.
• Lower risk of macular degeneration.
• Relief from PMS and menopausal symptoms.
• Reduced risk for colon cancer and possibly breast and prostate cancers.
• Healthy development of the neurological system in the womb and among infants and children.

**Supplements vs. Fish Sources**
The key omega-3 fats in fish are EPA (eicosapentaenoic acid) and DHA (docosahexaenoic acid). As a rule, approximately one-third of fish oil in supplements is a combination of EPA and DHA. Nutritionally oriented physicians usually recommend 1 gram daily of an EPA/DHA combination for healthy people, and up to 3 grams for those with heart disease, diabetes, inflammatory diseases, or other chronic conditions. Supplements usually state that they do not contain mercury or other toxins.

One 3-ounce serving of fresh, frozen, or canned salmon, or sardines can provide between 1 and 2 grams of omega-3 fats with negligible levels of mercury. In contrast, fast-food fish sandwiches are not a healthful option; in addition to being breaded and fried, they are usually made from cod, which is relatively low in omega-3s. Although the omega-3 content of cod varies, you’d need to eat between 1 and 1.5 pounds of the fish to get at least 1 gram of the healthful fats. And the mercury content of such a quantity of cod is estimated to be more than 50 times that of a 3-ounce serving of salmon or sardines.

**DID YOU KNOW?**
For information on mercury levels in commercial fish and shellfish, you can visit fda.gov.

**Supplements vs. Fish Sources**

**Flaxseeds, flax oil, chia seeds, and hemp are popular plant sources of omega-3 fats in the form of alpha-linolenic acid (ALA).** Our bodies convert ALA to the EPA and DHA forms found in fish. Although the effectiveness of the conversion process has been questioned, a study published in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* found that 2.4 to 3.6 grams of flax oil significantly increased EPA and DHA to levels that are therapeutic. When taking these plant forms of omega-3s, follow directions for specific products. Walnuts, pumpkin seeds, and their oils are other good food sources of ALA.

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![Image of red wine and Resveratrol-forte bottle]

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