Are You Overdue for a brain Lube?

Psychiatric disorders are high in areas where intake of omega-3 is low—and vice versa.

The consumption of omega-3 polyunsaturated fatty acids—the beneficial fat found in fish and fish oil—can reduce the symptoms of, and even prevent, a variety of psychiatric illnesses including schizophrenia, bipolar disorder and depression, several studies show.

"Research suggests that [fatty acids] may have a role in psychiatric disorders," says Dr. Andrew Stoll of the Harvard Medical School in Boston, Mass. His findings suggest that fish oil supplementation could help alleviate the symptoms of bipolar (manic-depressive) disorder.

For four months, Stoll gave 14 bipolar patients daily supplements of either fish oil or a placebo. He found that “overall, nine of 14 patients responded favourably to the addition of omega-3 fatty acids [to their diet] compared to only three of 16 patients receiving placebo.”

Another study focused on the effects of one fish-oil fatty acid—eicosapentaenoic or EPA—in the treatment of schizophrenia. A three-month trial conducted by Dr. Malcolm Peet of Northern General Hospital in Sheffield, England, found “a 25 per cent improvement [in schizophrenic symptoms] in the EPA treated group,” compared with patients receiving either docosahexaenoic acid (or DHA, another omega-3 fat) or placebo.

A third study, conducted by Dr. Joseph Hibbeln of the US National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism in Bethesda, Md., focused on levels of omega-3 fatty acids in the blood of 50 patients hospitalized after attempting suicide. Among non-depressed patients, high blood concentrations of EPA “predicted strikingly better scores in six different psychological rating scales that are related to suicidal risk.” Hibbeln says these findings suggest “some subgroups of suicidal patients may reduce their suicidal risk with the consumption of EPA."

The omega-3-depression connection

The brain’s synaptic membranes, where much of the brain’s neurological signalling takes place, contain a large proportion of essential fatty acids.
Why essential? Because these particular fatty acids must be derived entirely from the diet.

Both omega-3 and omega-6 fats are essential. But in the last century, western diets have radically changed. We eat grossly fewer omega-3 fatty acids now. Depression rates have radically increased by perhaps 100-fold over the same period of time. Experts agree we must get more omega-3s to offset long-term physical and mental health problems.

The current situation stems from our hunger for processing and frying foods, which destroys omega-3s. Unless they are free-range, most eggs are devoid of omega-3 because the chickens are not allowed to feed naturally off the ground.

The dietary pattern of Greenland provides the highest level of omega-3 fatty acids—three per cent of calories. Japan follows with 1.3 per cent of energy from omega-3s. But the typical Canadian diet contains a meagre 0.05 per cent of energy from omega-3 fatty acids.

As you might suspect from Greenland’s top ranking, the best source of omega-3 fatty acids is cold-water fish fat. Links between fish consumption and neurological health can be supported by the results of numerous global studies. Those findings suggest that rates of major depression are markedly different across countries—corresponding remarkably with how much fish is consumed.

**How to up your omega-3 intake**

The best start is to reduce your intake of processed and fried foods. Then start including fatty, cold-water fish such as sardines, herring, trout and salmon to your diet.

If you don’t like fish, you can purchase fish oil capsules at your local health food store. Keep refrigerated at all times and toss out if they begin to smell rancid. Taking fish oil along with your daily “greens” (a phytonutrient supplement) will enhance absorption of the greens.

If you are a vegan, you can get a large amount of omega-3 from the leafy green “weed” purslane (although it may be hard to locate). Another top food source is unprocessed, cold-pressed flax seed oil—but never heat it. You can also grind your own flax seeds in a coffee grinder and add the ground flax to cereals, smoothies and soups. Soy beans and soy bean oil are also high in this EFA.

English walnuts are respectable omega-3 sources and, to a lesser extent, so are beans. Uncooked vegetables contain some omega-3 as well. Vegans who avoid processed foods and consume a lot of vegetables should get sufficient amounts of this crucial fatty acid.

Every cell in the body requires this oil. But getting an ample supply of omega-3 fatty acids could mean preventing chronic depression or other psychological problems.

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