Are fish oil supplements safe?

Q The stories about mercury and other toxins in fish have me worried that my fish oil supplements may be contaminated. Have there been any studies of these toxins in fish oil capsules?

A Several of our readers have asked this question. Studies have shown a reduced risk for cardiovascular disease and sudden cardiac death in people who eat at least two servings of cold-water fatty fish per week. Such fish (and fish oil supplements) are high in omega-3 fatty acids— which can help prevent abnormal heart rhythms, blood clotting that can block arteries, and inflammation. They also lower blood levels of triglycerides, a risk factor for heart disease. The American Heart Association endorses fish oil supplements for people with cardiovascular disease and those with cardiac risk factors who cannot get 1,000 mg of fish oil a day from their diets. It also recommends that patients with high triglyceride levels consider taking 2,000–4,000 mg of fish oil per day.

Fish oil supplements may be a good source of omega-3 fatty acids for women who don’t like to eat fish. But it’s hard to ascertain the quality of different brands. However, I did find three reassuring studies.

How do you treat an anal fissure?

Q I had pain and some bleeding with bowel movements. I thought it was a hemorrhoid, but my doctor says it’s an anal fissure. How did I get this, and what’s the best way to treat it?

A An anal fissure is a tear in the tissue that lines the anal canal. They’re very common and most often are caused by trauma, such as the passage of hard stool. An anal fissure produces tearing pain while passing a bowel movement, accompanied by a small amount of blood on the toilet tissue or the surface of the stool. People often attribute these symptoms to hemorrhoids until their doctors spot the problem during a physical examination.

A fissure can easily become chronic, because after the first tear, bowel movements re-injure the area. The sphincter muscle beneath the tear goes into spasm, pulling the edges of the tear apart. A cycle of spasm and pain further damages the tissue and prevents healing.

Anal fissures tend to develop in the back center of the anus, which has less blood flow than other areas around the anus and may heal poorly or be more vulnerable to injury.

Simple home remedies can help. It’s important to relax the anal sphincter and keep stools soft and regular. Fiber from diet (for example, 1/4–1/3 cup unprocessed bran per day) or a supplement, such as psyllium (for example, Metamucil), is the mainstay of therapy. Plenty of fluid is also important. If fiber and fluid don’t do the trick, try an over-the-counter stool softener. Taking a warm sitz bath following a bowel movement helps relax the sphincter and alleviate pain. Vaseline and antibacterial ointments may also ease symptoms.

Topical nitroglycerine applied twice daily promotes healing by increasing blood flow to the area and reducing pressure in the anal sphincter. The dose necessary (0.2%) must be custom-formulated, so you may need to search to find a pharmacy that will do this for you. Injections of botulinum toxin into the sphincter muscle have been shown to heal some fissures, but recurrence is common.

If these measures fail, surgery is an option. Sphincterectomy is a very successful procedure that relieves pain and has a low recurrence rate. It carries a small risk of fecal incontinence, however, which is why experts recommend conservative therapies first. Researchers are also testing topical calcium-channel blockers, but these preparations are not yet commercially available in the United States.

Celeste Robb-Nicholson, M.D.
Editor in Chief, HWHW

Send us a question for By the way, doctor
Harvard Women’s Health Watch
10 Shattuck St., Suite 612
Boston, MA 02115
womens_health@hms.harvard.edu

Because of the volume of mail we receive, we can’t answer every letter. Nor can we provide personal medical advice.
MEDICAL DISCLAIMER

The information contained in this online site is intended to provide accurate and helpful health information for the general public. It is made available with the understanding that the author and publisher are not engaged in rendering medical, health, psychological, or any other kind of personal professional services on this site. The information should not be considered complete and does not cover all diseases, ailments, physical conditions or their treatment. It should not be used in place of a call or visit to a medical, health or other competent professional, who should be consulted before adopting any of the suggestions in this site or drawing inferences from it.