

healthy

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LIVING

BENEFITS OF OMEGA-3 FATTY ACIDS

Omega-3 fatty acids, specifically DHA (docosahexaenoic acid) and EPA (eicosapentaenoic acid) have been the subject of many studies over the years

- in fact there are over 19,000 dating back as far as 1946 on the National Center for Biotechnology Information database alone. This wonder nutrient cannot be manufactured in the body, making the consumption of it in our diet or via supplements essential. Omega 3 fatty acids can be found in flax seeds, walnuts, oily fish and soy beans. Without getting too technical, the type of omega 3 found in vegetable sources (nuts, seeds and soy beans) is alpha linolenic acid which then needs to be converted in the body to form the beneficial DHA and EPA fatty acids. Fish oil however already contains portions of DHA and EPA in its fatty acid profile.

Therefore, the reality is, unless you're eating at least one serving per week of oily fish, such as salmon, sardines, tuna, anchovies or mackerel, you probably should be taking a fish oil supplement.

So just why should you care about getting your daily omega 3?

There are a number of well supported benefits, below are the top 5 reasons you should up your omega 3 intake:

1. Normalising the inflammatory response: Omega 3 competes with pro-inflammatory arachidonic acid (AA) and reduces the production of other pro-inflammatory mediators such as prostaglandins and cytokines. Inflammation is an aspect of many conditions and contributes to pain. Fish Oil has been shown to reduce

inflammation associated with Crohn's disease, ulcerative colitis and arthritis (particularly rheumatoid arthritis) and improve joint mobility.

- 2. Heart health:** This is a broad category and fish oil has been shown to support many areas of heart health, such as blood pressure levels, triglyceride cholesterol levels and healthy circulation. Fish oil also has a protective effect on the heart itself.
- 3. Brain health:** Fatty acids are found in high concentrations in brain tissue. Omega 3 fatty acids, specifically DHA are essential for the healthy growth and functional development of our brains, before birth and for approximately the first year of life. Fish oil also assists with memory and learning in children and cognitive function in adults, it also helps to improve mood, attention and behaviour.



- 4. Skin health:** Fish oil can reduce the severity of dermatitis and may improve symptoms associated with psoriasis and eczema.
- 5. Respiratory health:** Due in part to the anti-inflammatory activity of fish oil, a correlation has been made with increased fish intake and decreased risk of asthma and improved lung function. As such it may be helpful as part of a management plan for people with asthma.

When it comes to choosing a supplement there are a few points to consider, mostly around safety and purity.

While fish oil is generally regarded as safe with few adverse reactions, side effects that have been reported include mild stomach upset, loose bowel motions, fishy odour on the breath, skin and in the urine. People taking blood thinning medication need to consult their physician prior to taking fish oil.

Two common questions arise with regard to the safety and purity of fish oil:

What if I have fish/seafood allergies?

Typically it is the protein (flesh) portion of the fish/shell fish that causes an immune response and subsequent allergic reaction. Fish oil is a refined product that aims to remove all unwanted substances and impurities, including the protein portion of the fish. However, it is possible for traces to be present. If someone has an allergy to fish/shellfish and is interested in trying fish oil, they need to consider the severity of their allergy. If they are anaphylactic (severely allergic) they may react to minute traces of protein that may be in the oil. If the allergy or intolerance is triggered by larger amounts of fish/shellfish, or if eating it causes mild symptoms such as stomach upset, mild skin irritation or headaches, then they may find that they can take fish oil without any problems. It is always wise to proceed with caution by starting on a low dose and to stop taking the supplement if symptoms arise. People with more severe allergies should consult with their health care provider first.

Isn't taking fish oil giving me a concentrated dose of heavy metals?

As a refined product, manufacturers aim to remove impurities such as heavy metals, pesticides and other toxins. Some manufacturers claim to be completely free from contaminants, in order to achieve this, the fish oil is further refined, often in a process called molecular distillation. The disadvantages of procedures such as molecular distillation are that the fish oil is left in a less



natural state (changed from its natural triglyceride form) and there is a higher chance of fishy odour. Fish oil that undergoes standard refining (not molecular distillation) maintains its natural triglyceride form and is less likely to have fishy taste or odour. All fish oil should meet British Pharmacopeia (BP) international industry standards of acceptable contaminant levels, containing only traces of heavy metals and other residues at levels that have been well researched and are considered to be safe - the fish we buy at the market carries no such guarantee!

It's also a good idea to ask about the source of your fish oil: is it sustainable, wild, farmed and what fish species are used? For optimal absorption take your fish oil with food, preferably a meal that also contains some fat.

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