

Good Fats?

If you read my last article you know all about the negative health effects of *trans* fats, but may be wondering what types of fats you should be eating. Not all fats are bad; in fact, research shows there can be many healthful benefits to eating the right kinds of fats. This article will focus on one particular type of ‘good fat’—the omega-3 fats.

Omega-3 fats are a polyunsaturated fat, part of the unsaturated family of fats. They are deemed *essential* fats due to their necessity for health and growth, and our inability to produce them within our bodies. This means that omega-3 fats must be obtained from diet. The major dietary sources of omega-3 fats are flaxseed (and flaxseed oil) and fatty (coldwater) fish such as herring, mackerel, salmon, and tuna.

The purported benefits of omega-3s are many—including reducing risk of heart disease and stroke, reduced inflammation, hypertension and depression, and improved immune system function. While some of these claims are more strongly supported than others, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has approved the health claim that consumption of EPA and DHA (two types of omega-3s) may reduce the risk of coronary heart disease.

Another important health factor is the ratio of omega-6:omega-3 fats in your diet. While omega-6 fats are also essential for health, consuming too many is associated with detrimental health effects. Sources of omega-6 fats include corn, cottonseed, and soybean oils, meaning many margarines, mayonnaise, and salad dressings are high in omega-6 fats. The omega-6:omega-3 ratio is important because omega-3s are known to ‘counteract’ the effects of excessive omega-6 consumption. Experts recommend keeping your ratio below 4:1, a far cry from the estimated 20:1 of the typical American diet. A good way to improve your ratio is to increase your intake of omega-3 fats—look to traditional Japanese and Mediterranean cuisine for meals rich in omega-3 fats. As you may expect me to say, omega-3 fats are best obtained from foods as opposed to supplements. They will be better absorbed and you can enjoy the benefits of all the other nutrients gained from ‘real food’. To help improve your ratio the American Heart Association recommends eating fish, particularly fatty fish, at least two times per week.

Remember, as with any dietary component, omega-3 fats should be enjoyed in moderation. Excessive consumption (>6g/day) may be associated with suppressed immune function and prolonged bleeding. However, this is much more likely to be a result of over-supplementation as opposed to increased dietary consumption. The FDA recommends consumers not exceed a total of 3g/day of EPA and DHA omega 3s, with no more than 2g/day from a dietary supplement.

Stay tuned: Though the press release came out too late for inclusion in this edition, my next article will discuss the recent doubling of the vitamin D recommendations for infants, children, and adolescents by the American Academy of Pediatrics.