



Food Facts

Omega-3 Fatty Acids Fishing for Facts

Introduction

We have all heard that eating fish regularly, especially oily fish which is rich in omega-3 fatty acids, can help to keep us healthy. Evidence for this has come from studies among populations where fish forms a regular part of the diet. For example the Inuit people (Eskimos) and the Japanese eat more fish than we do in the UK and other western societies and for them heart disease is much less common.

Benefits of eating oily fish include:

- Lower risk of heart and blood vessel disease
- Maintenance of healthy joints
- Healthy development of your baby



Where do the benefits come from?

The benefits are thought to come from the omega-3 fatty acids; docosahexaenoic acid (DHA) and eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA). You can make these fatty acids in your body from a parent essential fatty acid - Alpha Linolenic Acid (ALA), found mainly in green leafy vegetables, nuts, seeds and their oils - but this can be a slow process. To get the maximum benefit we should try to include oily fish which has high levels of pre-formed DHA and EPA.

Which fish are oily?

Fish/seafood high in omega-3 fatty acids include:

- Tuna (fresh)
- Salmon
- Herring
- Pilchards
- Mackerel
- Trout (Rainbow)
- Dogfish
- Shrimp
- Crab



Don't forget canned fish counts as well but some brands of tuna may have the omega-3 oils removed during processing so check the labels.

How much should I eat?

To get the most benefit adults and children over 12 are advised to eat 2 portions of fish per week (a portion is about 140g cooked), one of which should be oily. This is equal to about 450mg EPA/DHA per day.

Younger children will need less:

- eighteen months to three years: a third of a portion
- four to six years: half a portion
- seven to 11 years: two thirds of a portion



What about safety?

There has recently been much publicity about chemicals that may be harmful in some types of fish. For most of us there is no risk from eating up to 4 portions weekly. However, if you are pregnant or breastfeeding, or likely to become pregnant you should stick to a maximum of two portions weekly.

Shark, Swordfish and Marlin may contain concentrated sources of mercury and so should be avoided by women who are pregnant, breastfeeding or planning a baby, and all children under 16 years.

Supplements

There are currently no UK recommendations for supplement use but the following guidelines may be useful:

- Check labels for DHA/EPA content
- Stick to the amount in 2-4 portions of fish (450-900mg EPA/DHA)
- Choose an appropriate supplement recommended for children
- Seek advice from a Dietitian if in doubt

Conclusions

The health benefits of increased oily fish consumption outweigh the risks from pollutants. Most of us should try to eat more fish, bearing in mind the advice aimed at women of child-bearing age and children under 16.

By Julie Lanigan RD

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