

Catch of the Day: A Healthier Heart

by Beth Howard



Photo: Levi Brown

We're not saying you don't need to exercise and cut down on red meat. But fish oil supplements come close to providing heart health in a bottle.

It's the definition of *noncontroversial*: Omega-3 fatty acids are great for you. These beneficial fats, primarily found in oily fish, are critical for brain and nervous system development and help reduce excess inflammation—the kind that can lead to heart disease and other chronic health conditions. “Fish oil dramatically reduces the risk of coronary death,” notes Floyd Chilton, PhD, director of Wake Forest University’s Center for Botanical Lipids and Inflammatory Disease Prevention in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. So the benefits are inarguable. The arguments are in the fine print: How much omega-3 is enough? Which of the several supplements are best? And do you really need a supplement at all? On the following pages, we sort the help from the hype.

How Much is Enough?

There’s no established RDA for omega-3s, but to reap the maximum benefits, you should aim for up to 1,000 milligrams of a combination of two kinds of these fats a day. The two kinds—long-chain fatty acids called eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA) and docosahexaenoic acid (DHA)—are both derived mainly from fatty fish, fish oil and algae. Nutrition experts tend to downplay the heart-health benefits of a third, plant-based form of omega-3: a short-chain fatty acid named alpha-linolenic acid (ALA). That’s because your body is adept at absorbing EPA and DHA but is much less efficient at utilizing ALA, which has to be converted into a long-chain fatty acid. In other words, if you want to boost your omega-3s, think salmon, not ground flaxseed.

Why You're Probably Low

The American diet is awash in another set of beneficial fats, omega-6s, which come from meat, eggs and especially the corn, soybean and other vegetable oils prevalent in processed foods. Their

sheer abundance in the food supply guarantees you'll consume much more of the 6s than the 3s, and that's a problem: Both omegas need the same enzymes to break them down into forms the body can use and store in cells, says Stephen Kopecky, MD, a cardiologist at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota. The catch is that those essential enzymes are in limited supply. So when omega-6s dominate the diet, they use up the enzymes, and fewer omega-3 fats wind up available. "It's like a biological game of musical chairs. There are never enough chairs and, in the case of the body, never enough enzymes to go around," says Evelyn Tribole, RD, a nutritionist in Newport Beach, California, and author of *The Ultimate Omega-3 Diet*.

Imbalances have become greater over the years. "Fifty years ago, our diets were 2 to 1, omega-6s to omega-3s," says Chilton. "Now the typical person who walks into my lab has a greater than 10 to 1 ratio." Since it's hard to cut down on foods that supply omega-6s, experts suggest you shift the balance by boosting your intake of omega-3s.

Why Pills, and Which Work Best?

You can get sufficient omega-3s from diet alone, but only if you're a fan of the fin. "Eating oily fish four or five times a week is probably good enough. But few Americans actually do that," says Kopecky. Hence the need for supplements. But how do you choose among the various offerings?

You'll find a myriad of choices in pharmacies and vitamin stores: Some capsules are made from fish oil, others from algae. Some supplements contain both EPA and DHA; others do not. Which supplements to choose? Here are some guidelines.

Fish oil capsules are the best researched of the omega-3 supplements. These pills have been shown to lower the risk of heart attack, heart failure and sudden cardiac death. (In fact, patients with these disorders are often told to consume at least 800 milligrams of omega-3s a day, and people with high triglycerides can buy a prescription dose of 1,000 milligrams in the form of a pill called Lovaza.) Studies suggest that fish oil pills may also improve symptoms of arthritis, asthma and allergy, protect against age-related loss of brainpower and prevent the development of wrinkles.

Fish oil pills have clear benefits; however, if you're a vegetarian, you may prefer to take oil capsules made from algae, the small organisms that are normally eaten by marine life and passed up the food chain. Although algal oil hasn't been studied to the same extent that fish oil has, it does have an environmental advantage over the fish product. "Research shows that fish populations are declining. Growing algae may be more sustainable," says Chilton.

Any omega-3 supplement you purchase needs to contain both EPA and DHA with a combined amount of at least 650 milligrams, so check the nutrition label. Some studies have found that a 60-

to-40 split between EPA and DHA is effective; others support a 40-to-60 balance. But, says Tribole, “the ratio of one to the other doesn’t matter so much. What’s important is getting both omega-3s.”

Any Downside to Supplements?

Fish oil capsules can sometimes cause gas, bloating and fishy burps. You can reduce these problems by keeping the capsules in the fridge or by taking them with meals or at bedtime. Or you can avoid gut issues by swallowing enteric-coated capsules, which dissolve after they’ve passed through the stomach, releasing the contents farther down the digestive tract.

There are concerns that contaminants like mercury and polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) have accumulated in fish and thus fish oil. But many researchers feel that these fears are overblown. For instance, more than 90 percent of the PCBs in the U.S. food supply come from nonseafood sources like meat, dairy products, eggs and vegetables, according to a Harvard report. “It would be really tragic if some people missed the benefits of fish intake because of the potential low risk of toxins,” says Chilton.

Algal and fish oil supplements generally contain less mercury than fish do because fish oil comes from the animal’s fat stores while this toxin tends to accumulate in the muscles. And there’s no place for it to get deposited in algae.

Just to be on the safe side, many manufacturers distill fish oil before bottling it to remove any traces of mercury or other contaminants. (To be sure, look for the words *distilled*, *purified* or *metal free* on the label.) And a study by *Consumer Reports* concluded that the fish oil brands tested were clear of pollutants. Thus these supplements appear to be an incredibly simple way to help protect yourself from heart disease and maybe even slow down the clock.

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