

Chewing The Fat About Omega-3 Fatty Acids

Spinach, olives, avocados, salmon. It might sound like your typical Saturday morning grocery list, but these foods have something else in common—they're high in fat! For years now, we've been told to cut down on fat to help improve our health. That's why fat is at the top of the new Food Pyramid. All fat, however, is not created equal. Some fat—like omega-3 fatty acids—is actually good for your heart, your brain, your joints, and much more!

7 Ways to Trade the Bad for the Good

Eat salmon and tuna more often than steaks and burgers.

At your favorite fast-food restaurant, opt for the grilled chicken sandwich instead of the fried fish sandwich. (Why? Because the fish is usually cod, pollock, or flounder—which don't have high omega-3 levels.)

Snack on nuts instead of cookies, chips, or popcorn.

Top salads with olives, avocado, and nuts instead of croutons and bacon bits.

Dip bread in olive oil instead of slathering on the butter.

Choose ready-made packaged foods that are made with healthful canola oil.

Take an omega-3 fatty acid supplement every day—whether or not you enjoy eating fish.

Bad vs. Good Fat

To understand omega-3 fatty acids, you need to know the bad fat from the good fats. While all fats weigh in at 9 calories per gram, their chemical compositions vary—as do their potential to cause disease.

Saturated fat is the fat at the top of the Food Pyramid. Saturated fat causes your LDL ("bad") cholesterol to rise. Avoid eating too much saturated fat.

Monounsaturated fat is one of the good fats found in olive oil, canola oil, peanut oil, and in most nuts. This type of fat doesn't elevate cholesterol levels.

Omega-3 fatty acids are another good fat called polyunsaturated fat. Known as "essential fatty acids" because your body cannot make them, Omega-3 fatty acids are concentrated in cold-water fish, dark green leafy vegetables, flaxseed oils, pumpkin seeds, walnuts, and tofu.

Three Crucial Reasons to Get More Omega-3s!

Alpha-linolenic acid (ALA), eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA), and docosahexaenoic acid (DHA) are the major types of omega-3 fatty acids. Once eaten, ALA is converted to EPA and DHA which are more readily used by your body to protect your heart, maintain your brain and mental functions, and reduce joint problems.

Omega-3s Improve Heart Health

Diets rich in omega-3 fatty acids protect your heart by naturally lowering cholesterol and triglyceride levels.

Two major clinical studies have shown that regular consumption of fish (or, even better, a fish-oil supplement) can prevent sudden deaths due to abnormal heart rhythms.

Omega-3s Alleviate Depression and Symptoms of Other Mental Health Problems

Your brain is about 60% fat and it needs omega-3s to function properly. Omega-3 fatty acids help prevent mental health problems because they seem to keep the brain's entire traffic pattern of thoughts, reactions, and reflexes running smoothly and efficiently.

Omega-3s Reduce Joint Problems and Arthritis

Researchers have found that omega-3 fatty acid supplements can reduce joint tenderness, decrease morning stiffness, and allow for a reduction in the amount of medication needed for people with rheumatoid arthritis.

Skip the T-bone—Have the Salmon

In addition to these healthy benefits, various research shows omega-3 fatty acids to be effective in helping with asthma, inflammatory bowel disease, obesity, Alzheimer's disease, and more. Add an omega-3 dietary supplement to your diet and give your body a nutritious punch—naturally!

Do I Need an Omega-6 Fatty Acid Supplement?

Most likely, no. Omega-6s are another essential fatty acid that play a role in nerve function, skin health, and wound healing. However, omega-6s are much more abundant than omega-3 fatty acids in the typical American diet. Nutritionists recommend eating a 5-to-1 ratio of omega-6 to omega-3 fatty acid. Typical Inuit Eskimo, Japanese, and Mediterranean diets fit this ratio—and these cultures tend to have healthier cardiovascular systems. American diets, however, fall short with a balance closer to 20-to-1! By increasing your omega-3 intake—either through your diet or supplementation—you'll bring this ratio more into balance and enjoy a healthier lifestyle.