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**Fish Oil and Essential Fatty Acids**

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Fish oil supplements are popular. In fact, a survey published just last year by [Consumer Labs](https://www.consumerlab.com/news/consumers-returned-to-pre-pandemic-supplement-uses/02-24-2022/) showed that over half of Americans who use at least one dietary supplement take fish oil. You may be one of them, or maybe you’re wondering if you should be. Let’s talk about fish oil – what it is, how it might be helpful, and what to watch for if you choose to use it.



***How fish oil became popular***

About 50 years ago, researchers found that a group of people in [Greenland](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/2736000/) had unusually low rates of heart disease. With more investigation, the researches learned it was most likely due to their diet -- specifically the high intake of fatty fish. And when they looked even more closely, they found that it was certain fatty acids that made the difference. Omega-3’s and omega-6’s were the fatty acids found to be most likely for the low rates of heart disease.

It turns out that while our bodies can manufacture many of the fatty acids it needs to do its work, it can’t manufacture omega-3’s and omega-6’s. So these fatty acids are called “essential fatty acids”, meaning that we have to eat them to stay as healthy as possible.

Just for clarity, omega-3’s consist of ***EPA*** (eicosapentaenoic acid), ***DHA*** (docosahexaenoic acid), and ***ALA*** (alpha-lineoleic acid).  Omega 3's aren't consumed in adequate amounts in the average American diet; these are the ones you'll usually find in fish oil supplements. Omega-6 is mostly linoleic acid, and most Americans tend to get plenty of it in their daily diet.

***Why are essential fatty acids "essential"?***

Omega 3's and omega 6's provide a number of health benefits. Preliminary research suggested that omega-3s and omega-6’s had a variety of beneficial effects on health. Improved heart health, decreased cholesterol, prevention of dementia, and lower levels of inflammation are some of them. Research pretty clearly shows that there are substantial health benefits when these fatty acids are included in the diet.

The problem is that further research looking carefully at *dietary supplements* of fish oil hasn’t consistently shown improved health outcomes. So it’s not clear that the widespread use of fish oil supplements is warranted.

You may wonder – if fish oil supplements aren’t clearly helpful, how did all those people in Greenland get so healthy from fish oil? Well, first remember that research continues on fish oil supplements, and we may learn more in coming years. But we’ve also said in these pages that when supplements have been compared to healthy, balanced diets, [diet usually wins](https://bettermymeds.com/2018/07/13/dietary-supplements-wait-supplements-to-what/). Is that because when we fill our diet with healthful foods we’re not as likely to eat unhealthy ones? Is it because people who eat healthy diets also maintain health in other ways? Hopefully we’ll find the answers to those questions someday. But we don’t have them yet.

There are easy ways to get [omega-3s](https://www.healthline.com/nutrition/12-omega-3-rich-foods#1.-Mackerel-(-4,580-mg-per-serving)) into your diet though. Tuna and salmon are two examples of foods high in omega-3’s, and just two 3-4 ounce servings per week will provide all you need. A variety of nuts, seeds, and oils are good sources, too.

On the other hand, there’s nothing particularly dangerous about fish oil supplements. As with other dietary supplements, they can be expensive. But there are relatively few worrisome drug interactions (check with your pharmacist or go to[drugs.com](https://www.drugs.com/drug_interactions.html) to be sure). And side effects are typically mild. So while the benefits of taking fish oil may be unclear, the risks are low.

***So if you choose to use supplements…..***

Be sure the product you choose is [pure and potent](https://bettermymeds.com/2018/07/05/dietary-supplements-the-importance-of-potency-and-purity/). Look for a seal of approval on the label, or check with your pharmacist to be sure the product is reliable.

Read the label carefully! I say this about all dietary supplements, and it's important for fish oil, too Experts suggest a daily omega-3 intake of about 1 gram. That means 1 gram of ALA, EPA, and DHA combined. If the label shows the amount of “fish oil concentrate”, be sure to look for the amounts of EPA, DHA, and ALA. Take a look at the label below. It shows a total fish oil concentrate of 2400 mg (2.4 gm). That sounds like even more than you need on a daily basis, right? But when you look more closely, it contains less than 1 gm of omega-3's.Table

Description automatically generatedHow many capsules do you have to take to get the listed amount? Look carefully at the serving size on the back of the label.

And don’t assume the amount on the front of the label is contained in one capsule. It could be two, three, or more. The label above shows that two capsules need to be taken each day to get the 720 mg of omega-3's listed.

***Essential fatty acids are essential to your health!***

Consider modifying your diet to get this important nutrient. Supplements are available if you choose, but don’t get fooled by the label. As always, if you have comments or questions, please comment in the space below. Or contact us directly at ***Better My Meds***. We love hearing from you!



Betty Chaffee, PharmD, is owner and sole proprietor of BetterMyMeds, a Medication Management service devoted to helping people get the maximum benefit from their medications.