



Omega-3s: As good as ‘they’ say

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Ask almost any group of people what kinds of foods they should avoid and one of

the top responses will be ‘fats’. True enough in many ways, but some types of fat are actually good for your health — indeed, essential. These are the omega-3 fatty acids found in foods like fish, walnuts, flax and hemp seeds.

The benefits to your body of omega-3s are extensive. They have been linked to lowered risk of heart disease and stroke; reducing high blood pressure; some research even suggests they can boost the immune system and protect us against illnesses such as Alzheimer’s disease. Not bad considering all you need is a gram or so a day, but more on that below.

Fatty acids are the basic units of fat molecules, and fat molecules are necessary for health and the proper functioning of the body.

Among these are the omega-3 fatty acids. They are in the group called polyunsaturated fats, and yes, that is the ‘good’ kind. They come in three varieties (flavours, if you must), none of which the body can manufacture by itself. That means omega-3s must be ingested, usually from our food, but sometimes with dietary supplements.

Good sources of omega-3 fatty acids are plenty. Plant sources include flaxseed, especially when ground, hemp seeds and canola oil. Seafood including fish and shellfish is an excellent source of omega-3s. Fatty fish such as salmon, trout, sardines and tuna are all excellent sources.

The recommended amount of omega-3 fatty acids per day ranges from 0.7 grams for children to age three, to 1.6 grams for men over age 14. Women should be get-

ting 1.1 grams, or 1.3 to 1.4 if pregnant or breastfeeding. But how much is that? Great question!

Getting enough omega-3s into your diet is not difficult. An ounce (a small handful) of walnuts contains 1.1 grams; as do two tablespoons of hemp seeds or one of canola oil.

Eating fish twice a week is well recommended... but there is a ‘however’: be aware that some fish contain toxins such as PCBs and mercury. Usually, the higher on the food chain, the more toxins will have accumulated. Therefore, fish such as shark, swordfish and some tuna are more likely to contain more toxins. That said, the benefits of eating fish far outweigh any potential risk from toxins.

When choosing what fish to include in your diet, first consider salmon, haddock, clams, oysters, shrimp, scallops and tilapia as they have the lowest levels of

toxins. Fish with medium levels include cod, crab, snapper, trout and light tuna. High levels of mercury are more likely in grouper, halibut, white albacore tuna and North American

lobster. Women who are pregnant or might become pregnant, those breastfeeding and young children all should keep the high-mercury fish to a maximum of once a month.

Getting omega-3 fatty acids into your diet is quite simple. In addition to fish on the menu, try sprinkling chopped walnuts, flax or hemp seeds into your cereal or yoghurt, or add them to baking for a flavourful, nutritious treat. When eating eggs, choose those fortified with omega-3s.

Omega-3 fatty acids are a necessary part of all our diets, and getting them into the menu adds taste, texture and health benefits. How simple is that?

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into your diet is not difficult.***