

# What You Should Know About Omega-3 Fatty Acids for Your Heart

**T**he unsaturated fat in fish, called omega-3 fatty acids, has been shown to reduce the risk of heart disease. The American Heart Association recommends that adults eat dark fatty fish—such as salmon, tuna, herring, trout, sardines, or mackerel—at least twice a week. Omega-3 fatty acids are also available in dietary supplements. These pills are now among the top five best-selling dietary supplements.

## How do omega-3 fatty acids help your heart?

Omega-3 fatty acids (omega-3s) are a type of unsaturated fat that reduces inflammation in the body and keeps triglycerides in check. Inflammation in the body can damage blood vessels and lead to heart disease. The anti-inflammatory effect of marine (from fish) omega-3s may also help prevent or treat rheumatoid arthritis, inflammatory bowel diseases, depression, and cognitive decline. With the exception of effects on heart disease, however, the research has been limited and study results have been inconclusive.

Another omega-3 fatty acid is found in plant sources such as flaxseed, walnuts, and canola and soybean oils. These plant-based omega-3s are not as well studied as fish in terms of heart health benefits.

## How much should you take?

For heart protection, eating fatty fish twice a week is roughly equivalent to 400 to 500 mg of omega-3s per day. Patients with heart disease should aim for a daily dose of 1 gram. For some individuals, including those worried about contaminants in fish, fish-oil supplements may be a preferable way to meet the recommended doses. In addition, an increasing number of foods are omega-3 fortified. More than 1,200 such products were launched in 2006 alone.

## Are omega-3s safe to take?

Some people are worried about the safety of eating fish because fish can have high levels of mercury and other contaminants. Current recommendations for most adults, however, say that the heart benefits of eating fish (especially smaller varieties) outweigh the possible risks of these contaminants.



Fish oil supplements do not appear to contain contaminants. Check the label to see how much marine omega-3 is actually in the capsules as they might contain only one-third of the fish oil dose listed on the front of the bottle. For foods that are fortified with omega-3s, be sure to check package labels because some of them may contain *vegetable* omega-3s, not marine, which may not offer as much benefit to the heart.

## Are there side effects?

Omega-3s appear to be safe for most adults at low-to-moderate doses. However, fish oil supplements may cause minor gastrointestinal upset and at high doses can interact with certain medications, including blood thinners and drugs used for high blood pressure. High doses of fish oil seem to slow blood clotting. Avoid excessive consumption of marine omega-3s, as 3 or more grams per day may trigger bleeding—doses this high should be taken only under medical supervision.

For additional information, visit:  
<http://nccam.nih.gov/health/omega3/introduction.htm>