

Omega-3 Fatty Acids: Beneficial for Heart Health, but No Miracle Cure

Researchers have shown that omega-3 fatty acids provide several health benefits. Omega-3 fatty acids can also provide considerable protection against certain chronic diseases and conditions. Our bodies require omega-3 fatty acids but cannot produce them on their own. They must come from food sources. However, they're no miracle cure.

Omega-3 fatty acids come in 3 different varieties: alpha-linolenic acid (ALA), eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA), and docosahexaenoic acid (DHA). The body converts ALA to EPA and DHA. ALA comes from plant sources, while EPA and DHA are found primarily in cold water fish.

Benefits of Omega-3

A 1999 study published in *The Lancet* showed there were definitive benefits of including omega-3 fatty acids in the diet. The researchers gave a daily dose of 1 gram of omega-3 to people who had recently had a heart attack. After only three months, people who received the dose had a 20% overall lower risk death risk and a 45% lower risk of heart attack compared to the control group.

Other research has found that adequate consumption of omega-3 fatty acids can

- lower triglycerides by 20-50%.
- provide some preventative effect against Alzheimer's disease.
- lower blood pressure among people with hypertension.
- protect against arterial plaque buildup.
- improve insulin sensitivity in older adults.
- provide limited relief of rheumatoid arthritis (for up to three months).

Limitations of Omega-3

Although omega-3 has received considerable media attention and supplement marketers have made innumerable health claims, it's no miracle cure. A study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* found that while consumption of fish oil supplements may have slow or prevent the onset of Alzheimer's disease, its effects in reversing the disease were negligible. Another study published in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* showed fish oil supplements had no benefit for weight loss.

Other common yet inconclusive omega-3 health claims are:

- Cancer prevention. Though epidemiological studies suggest high levels of omega-3 fatty acids may reduce the risk of certain cancers, no controlled studies have been done.
- Treatment of bipolar disorder, depression, and schizophrenia. Initial studies are promising, but research remains inconclusive

- Stroke prevention. Some studies show benefits, while others do not. High levels of omega-3 consumption can actually increase the risk of stroke.

How to Include Omega-3 In Your Diet

Fortunately, it's easy to include omega-3 in your diet is easy. According to the American Heart Association, people should eat a 3.5 ounce serving of fatty fish once or twice a week. Fatty fish include salmon, mackerel, herring, tuna, and halibut. Omega-3 fatty acids are also found in tofu, walnuts, pecans, and especially flaxseed. These vegetable sources contain only ALA, and the body must convert them. For most people, this isn't a problem,

Fish oil supplements are a convenient substitute for those who have trouble getting enough omega-3 fatty acids from food sources. The U.S. FDA recognizes dosages of up to 3 grams per day as a generally safe amount for healthy individuals. Anyone with a serious medical condition should speak to their doctor before taking supplements.

Conclusion

While they're no miracle cure, solid scientific research shows that including omega-3 fatty acids in your diet can help improve your overall cardiovascular health, especially if you currently suffer from heart disease. Eating fish and fish oil supplements are an easy and safe way to add this essential fat to your diet.