

Aging Well: Spotlight on Omega-3s

Omega-3 fatty acids, a type of fat found primarily in cold-water ocean fish, can be a big part of your healthful aging diet because this type of fat helps decrease the risk of cardiovascular disease, reduce internal inflammation that is an important component of type 2 diabetes, arthritis, and some types of cancer, and also plays a key role in maintaining active, healthy brain function.

There are **three primary forms of omega-3 fatty acids**: **DHA** (docosahexaenoic acid), **EPA** (eicosapentaenoic acid), and **ALA** (alpha-linolenic acid). Seafood is the best source of EPA and DHA, which in turn have the greatest impact on our health. Many foods from plants contain ALA, however, our bodies are only able to convert a small amount of ALA into DHA and EPA.

Brain Function and Dementia

Omega-3 fatty acids are involved in a variety of neurological transmission pathways in our brain, and they also seem to help protect the brain during aging. As we age, both white and grey matter volumes decline, and plaque can build up that contributes to decreased memory and cognitive function. People who consume more omega-3 fatty acids have better cognitive function and a reduced risk for dementia, with some studies showing a 40-50% reduced risk. Supplementing your diet with omega-3 fatty acids in the form of fish oil shows inconsistent results, with some people experiencing improved brain function and others experiencing no change in others.

Cardiovascular Disease

Heart disease is the leading cause of death in the United States. Omega-3 fatty acids play an important role in protecting against peripheral artery disease, heart attack, atherosclerosis, and stroke. EPA and DHA help reduce inflammation (a key cause of cardiovascular disease), decrease risk of abnormal heartbeat (which can lead to a heart attack), and improve the function of the blood vessels to reduce plaque, lower blood pressure, and reduce the risk of stroke.

Food Sources of Omega-3 Fatty Acids

Fatty fish such as mackerel, lake trout, herring, sardines, albacore tuna, and salmon are especially good sources of EPA and DHA. Seafood with lower fat levels, such as cod, tilapia, and shellfish, contain smaller amounts of EPA and DHA. The American Heart Association recommends consuming two servings (each 3.5 ounces or $\frac{3}{4}$



cup cooked fish) twice each week. ALA is found in ground flaxseeds, flaxseed oil, canola oil, soybeans, soybean oil, pumpkin seeds, walnuts, and walnut oil. Since our body does not efficiently process ALA into the more beneficial DHA and EPA, larger amounts of these foods need to be consumed for health benefits. While consuming seafood and foods high in ALA can support good health, high doses of supplemental omega-3 fatty acids in fish oil may increase the risk of bleeding and hemorrhagic stroke.

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