

Fish May Win the War on Heart Disease

FDA recognizes the health benefits of omega-3 fatty acids, and fish have plenty of them.

a QualityHealth exclusive

For decades, mothers and doctors alike have extolled the virtues of eating fish. Characterized as everything from "brain food" to a good source of lean protein, the scaly sea dwellers have long been considered an essential part of a healthy diet. Now, nutrition experts believe that fish may be a key factor in winning the war against heart disease.



In September 2004, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved a "qualified health claim" for fish and certain other foods, allowing some manufacturers to state that their products could reduce the risk of coronary heart disease. The FDA's move brings official credence to nutritionists' claims that the omega-3 fatty acids in fish could be an effective tool in the quest for heart health.

Katherine Tallmadge, R.D., a spokeswoman for the American Dietetic Association in Washington, D.C., says a diet rich in omega-3s can have a significant impact on cholesterol levels and heart-attack risk. The acids also tend to reduce inflammation, a risk factor in heart disease.

"It also reduces platelet aggregation, which is blood clotting," Tallmadge says. "It's been found to increase survival rates after a heart attack. It's been shown to prevent heart disease. The sad thing is, most Americans don't get enough."

Omega-3 — which is distributed to every cell in the body — comes in two forms: eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA) and docosahexaenoic acid (DHA). The two have only slight chemical differences, Tallmadge says, but it's important to get both kinds. Right now, fish is the most ideal source for omega-3 acids, with plentiful amounts of both EPA and DHA. Oily freshwater fish like salmon, mackerel and herring have the highest concentrations of omega-3, but smaller amounts can be found in other species. The American Heart Association recommends at least two servings of fish per week, four for people with cardiovascular problems. Pregnant women should limit their intake to 12 ounces per week to avoid mercury and other environmental pollutants found in some fish, Tallmadge says.

Omega-3 Sources for People Who Don't Eat Fish

Alternative omega-3 sources are also available for people who don't eat fish. Walnuts, flaxseed, canola oil and soy are rich in alpha-linolenic acid (ALA), which is converted to omega-3 acids in the body, says Debra Strong, R.D., of the Ochsner Health Foundation in New Orleans, La.

"The DHA and EPA are better sources, so you need higher concentrations of the ALA," Strong says. "You would need 2 to 3 grams, versus one gram." Currently, there are no

official dietary recommendations for ALA-rich foods, but Strong says it's best to eat about one-quarter of a cup every day. Since many of these foods are also high in calories and fat, they should substitute for other fats in the diet, rather than add to them.

"We're not trying to promote fat; we're just trying to replace some fat," Strong says.

More Omega-3-enhanced Foods Coming Soon

The FDA's new health-claim allowance may soon result in more "omega-3-enhanced" foods on store shelves. Eggs and margarine fortified with the fatty acids are already available in some areas. But Strong says these products are trivial sources at best, and they should not take the place of foods that naturally contain omega-3. Also, no studies have been done on their ability to improve heart health, according to Tallmadge.

"I hope people just continue to eat fish in its natural state and not try to mess with Mother Nature too much," Tallmadge says.

Omega-3 fatty acids are also being studied for their ability to ward off other conditions. A recent study at the University of California-Los Angeles suggests that DHA may prevent Alzheimer's disease, and Tallmadge says omega-3 acids could alleviate depression.

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