

Seafood and Omega 3 Fatty Acids

Omega 3, that's a word that's been buzzing around for quite a while. It's supposed to be this great health supplement – you can find it on the vitamin shelf and advertised across the web. It comes from the ocean, but is it really this oily stuff in a jar? Is it these pills? “No,” says Asheville, NC seafood restaurant owner, George Baxevanis. “Omega 3 is what we do here all day; its seafood.” Found as natural oil in fish, omega 3s have a wide variety of health benefits.

Now you're probably thinking, how can something called “fatty” have health benefits? Easy, there are two kinds of fat: saturated and unsaturated. The saturated make you unhealthy by clogging arteries and raising your cholesterol levels; the unsaturated ones are essential nutrients. Essential nutrients are things your body can't go without; they are the basic building blocks of life.

What's the Skinny on Omega 3 Fatty Acids?

So, what makes these “fatty” acids better than the rest? They have a final carbon bond located at the n-3...blah blah blah. Unless you're schooled in chemistry, this sheds little light as to why omega 3s are good. Studies show that a diet rich in omega 3 fatty acids can lead to a lowered risk of heart disease as well as a number of other benefits. Some research has linked omega 3 fatty acids to improvements with depression, anxiety, arthritis, immune function, brain health and even cancer.

There are three omega 3 fatty acids important to nutrition – ALA, EPA and DHA. ALA is a short chain omega 3 and can be used by the body to synthesize long chain fatty acids. It's often found as a supplement but only converts about five percent to the long chain fatty acids. EPA and DHA are long chain fatty acids. They gained notoriety in the 70s when a study of the Inuit people showed low instance of heart disease and other ailments, despite a diet high in fat. Long chain Omega 3s were shown to have reduced triglycerides, heart rate, blood pressure and atherosclerosis. Omega 3s are endorsed by medical associations worldwide.

Micro Algae, the very foundation of life on earth, produce EPA and DHA throughout the world's oceans. As the first link of the food chain, these micro algae feed the subsequent links and so on until it reaches us. Certain fish, particularly cold water fish, have high levels of these advantageous fatty acids. Algae eat the micro algae, then krill eat the algae, then a small fish eats the krill and a large fish eats the small fish; we eat the big fish. The cumulative effect is a healthy and tasty treat rich in long chain omega 3 fatty acids.

What Fish Are Best?

The fish highest in omega 3s are typically cold water species like salmon, mackerel and cod. Some others commonly found are sardines and anchovies; these are rarely seen as fresh fish but are frequently preserved and used as an ingredient. The number of species on menus today is varied and there are some others falling into the cold water category such as Arctic Char which is closely related to salmon and trout. Halibut is also popular with fish ranging from 10 to 1,500 pounds or more. There are some fish rich in omega 3s that are not typically associated with cold water – flounder, swordfish and catfish to name a few. That's right; catfish is a significant source of omega 3 fatty acids.

The health advantages of omega 3s are tremendous. They have been linked to the proper functioning of nearly every body system. The added bonus is that you don't have to “take” it as a pill. All you have to do is eat some fish. Remember, before making any big lifestyle changes, check with your doctor first.