

# nutrition journal

## Why Women Should **EAT FISH**

Omega 3 fatty acids not only protect the heart, they may also help prevent breast cancer.

by Susan Learner Barr, R.D.

When it comes to fish, the good news keeps getting better. New studies are showing that the oils known as omega 3 fatty acids have an even stronger and broader impact on health—particularly women's health—than has been realized. Derived from deep-sea fish, these polyunsaturated fats have long been known to help protect against heart disease. Now, there is evidence indicating that omega 3 fatty acids may be especially important to women for their cardiovascular well-being, as well as in helping prevent breast cancer and menstrual cramps.

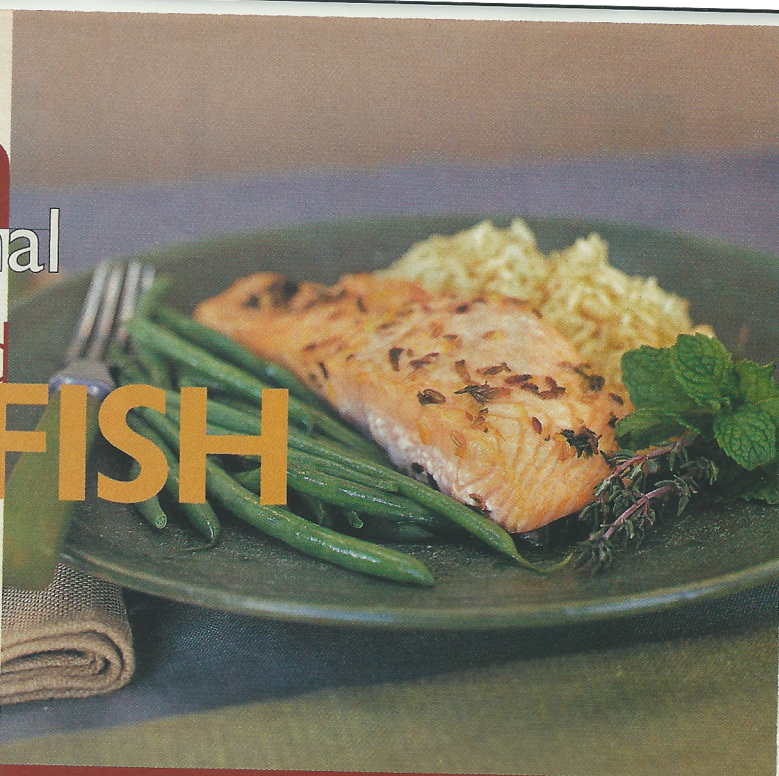
The role of fish oils in heart health stems from their power to lower blood levels of fat molecules called triglycerides. Once considered a bit player in the heart disease scenario (cholesterol has traditionally held top billing), triglycerides have recently been

moved up to a starring part. In analyzing 30 years of data from the ongoing landmark Framingham (Massachusetts) Heart Study, researchers have discovered that as triglyceride levels rise, so does the risk of heart disease. What's more, the harmful effect seems to be more pronounced in women than in men. As a result, doctors now consider that for women a high level of triglycerides is all by itself a risk factor for heart disease. In other words, your cholesterol level may be fine, but if your triglycerides are up, so is your chance of heart disease.

Just what's considered a "high" triglyceride level is under debate. At a recent meeting of the American Heart Association, physicians questioned whether what's accepted as normal (200 milligrams per deciliter of blood or lower) may be too high, especially for women. "We may have to re-evaluate current guidelines," says Michael Miller, M.D., director of preventive cardiology at the University of Maryland Medical Center in Baltimore.

### Fish Rich in oils

HALIBUT	SNAPPER
SALMON	STRIPED BASS
TUNA	MACKEREL
BLUEFISH	HADDOCK



Have a meal of sumptuous salmon: It's a treat for your taste buds, and the fish oil will help keep you healthy by lowering triglycerides.

Whatever the danger mark, doctors stress that women can help protect themselves by making sure they get fish oils in their diet. A quarter teaspoon a day (about one gram) of omega 3 fatty acids can reduce triglycerides. Even a smaller dose can have an effect. A recent study of healthy young Welsh women found that less than one gram a day of fish oils lowered triglyceride as well as cholesterol levels. Long-term results are also encouraging. A seven-year study of women (and men) in Great Britain discovered that taking about two grams of fish oils a day lowered triglycerides, reduced blood pressure and elevated levels of HDL, the "good" cholesterol.

Omega 3 fatty acids appear to have a part in preventing cancer as well. *The British Journal of Cancer* reported last July that people who ate diets high in meat and other saturated fats and who consumed fish oil reduced their expected risk of breast and colorectal cancers. More support comes from a Michigan

State University study showing that dietary fish oils suppress the growth of human breast cancer cells implanted in mice.

Fish oils may offer benefits in other areas as well. A diet high in omega 3 fatty acids helped alleviate menstrual cramps in teenage girls in one trial. Studies are also exploring fish oils' potential to relieve sufferers of rheumatoid arthritis and psoriasis.

Today, there's more reason than ever to dive into dining on fish. Just two or three marine-based meals a week is all it takes to get the benefits. The best and most bountiful sources of omega 3 fatty acids are dark- or pink-fleshed fish rather than the white-fleshed varieties. One three-ounce serving of deep-sea denizens, such as mackerel, salmon, tuna or bluefish, will provide you with a gram or more of healthful omega 3s. So if you haven't yet traded in your cheese sandwiches and beef tacos for tuna salads and salmon steaks, now's the time. There's nothing fishy about a fish diet.