[Omega Fatty Acids]

Understanding Omega Fatty Acids

By: Cindy Mitchell

Nutritionists call omega-3 and omega-6 fatty acids “essential” fats for good reason. The human body needs them for many functions, from building healthy cells to maintaining brain and nerve function. Our bodies can’t produce them. The only source is food.

These polyunsaturated fats are important for another reason. There’s growing evidence that they help lower the risk of heart disease. Some studies suggest these fats may also protect against type 2 diabetes, Alzheimer’s disease, and age-related brain decline.

Omega-6 mostly comes as linoleic acid from plant oils such as corn oil, soybean oil, and sunflower oil, as well as from nuts and seeds. Omega-3s come primarily from fatty fish such as salmon, mackerel, and tuna, as well as from walnuts and flaxseed in lesser amounts.

Scientists are still debating the optimal amount of fat in a healthy diet, as well as the best proportion of omega-6s and omega-3s. For now, there are several simple changes most of us could make to take advantage of their substantial health benefits.

Do you know why we need to consume Omega-3 fatty acids? Did you know your body cannot make Omega-3 fats on its own? Well, the only way to feed your body these essential fats are to eat foods rich in Omega-3’s or take a fish oil supplement.

Vitamin Lady At Middle Earth store carries a few different Omega-3 supplements, they can be found at http://shop.vitaminlady.com/viewcart.sc

Summary of Food Sources

Like all creatures, fish have an omega-3 content that is highly dependent on their diet. If they eat algae, sea plants, and other foods that are rich in omega-3s, they are able to store more omega-3s in their tissue. If they live in a habitat where omega-3s are not widely available, they store much less. The close relationship between their diet and their omega-3 content applies to all specific omega-3s found in fish, including ALA, EPA, and DHA. It also applies to all types of fish including wild-caught and farmed. Some farmed fish are fed processed omega-3 concentrates to boost their omega-3 content. Other farmed fish are fed few omega-3s and have lower-than average omega-3 content.

Land animals are no different from fish in terms of their omega-3 content. Their diet is the key controlling factor—the same as it is for ocean creatures. Cows and chickens consuming diets that are rich in omega-3s tend to produce milk and eggs that are higher in omega-3 fats. Levels of omega-3s in eggs can reach levels of 350 milligrams per egg, depending on the hen's diet. In cow's milk, omega-3 levels have been shown to reach 155 milligrams per 8-ounce cup in some grass-fed heifers. About half of these omega-3s are typically present in the form of ALA, with the other half being divided between EPA, DHA, and other omega-3s. As a general rule, the milk, cheese, yogurt, and eggs obtained from land animals that have been grass-fed and have had natural access to pasture plants containing omega-3s are going to be your best bet for omega-3s from land animals.

Other omega-3 fortified foods are becoming available on the market, including margarine spreads, juices, and snack foods. These foods are generally made by adding the fatty acids during the manufacturing process. As with all nutrients, we believe that your omega-3s are best obtained from whole, natural foods. Unless food is whole and natural, there is no way to guarantee that its nutrients will be found in optimal ratios and balanced proportions, or even incorporated into the food matrix in an optimal way.

We would like to add a special note about one food that does not appear on our ranking list as a good, very good, or excellent source of omega-3s. That food is tuna. In our nutrient analysis, we used baked yellow fin tuna. A 4-ounce serving of this form of tuna provided 140 milligrams of omega-3s and 147 calories. When we put these numbers into our rating system formula, tuna provided too few omega-3s in comparison with its calorie content to rank as a good source of omega-3s. However, we do not believe that this outcome would automatically be true for all tuna. We've seen studies on canned light tuna that showed about 345 milligrams of omega-3s in 4 ounces, and in the case of canned albacore tuna, we've seen studies showing about 975 milligrams of omega-3s in 4 ounces. Their higher levels of omega-3s would change the status of tuna in our rating system. However, our approach to healthy eating is always focused on fresh, natural, and minimally processed foods rather than canned or other versions