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Nutrition focus

The omega question

Are you getting the right balance of essential fatty acids? We help you find out

We've all heard about the importance of essential fats – omega-3, -6 and -9. But, while most of us fail to get enough omega-3 oils, many nutrition scientists believe our modern diets provide an excess of omega-6 and -9. This unhealthy balance may increase the risk of inflammatory diseases, such as arthritis and cancer. Here's how to get the right balance.

Omega-3

Found in oily fish, flaxseed oil and rapeseed oil, omega-3s are a family of polyunsaturated fats. The key health-giving omega-3s are long-chain variety eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA) and docosahexaenoic acid (DHA) found in oily fish. Short chain omega-3 fatty acid, alpha-linolenic acid (ALA), is found in walnuts, linseeds and rapeseed oil. The body can convert ALA into DHA and EPA but not very effectively, so, unless you are vegetarian, fish is the best source.

Benefits: Omega-3s help blood flow more freely, reducing the risk of a heart attack or stroke. They also maintain a healthy brain and ease joint problems by reducing inflammation.

Healthy intake: Most of us have an inadequate intake. To get enough, eat one to two oily fish meals a week or take a fish oil supplement. If you're vegetarian or don't like eating fish, look for a supplement containing EPA and DHA from marine algae. Other natural sources of omega-3s include flax, rapeseeds, walnuts and some green leafy vegetables, such as kale, but these contain the alpha-linolenic acid form – which the body has to work really hard to process into EPA and DHA.

Omega-6

Polyunsaturates, omega-6s are prevalent in sunflower, soya and corn oils and nuts. Linoleic acid is the omega-6 essential fatty acid from which all the other omega-6s are derived. For example, evening primrose oil

contains gamma-linolenic acid (GLA) which is a longer chain omega-6 fatty acid. Although we consume a lot of linoleic acid, it isn't efficiently processed by the body to GLA. So taking a supplement of evening primrose oil adds to your omega-6 intake, and can be of benefit to people with allergic conditions, such as asthma and eczema.

Benefits: Omega-6s have the strongest cholesterol-lowering effect of all the good fats.

Healthy intake: The government advises we consume omega-6 and omega-3 in a ratio of five to one, but current intake is more like 10 or 20 to one. The reason for this imbalance is because omega-6-rich oils are found in many processed foods and in poultry. To keep your omega-6 intake in check, avoid sunflower or corn oil (try olive or rapeseed instead) and follow the omega-3 advice above. If you're taking a supplement, ensure the type of omega-6 is the GLA type.

Omega-9

Found in olive and rapeseed oils, nuts and avocados, omega-9s are monounsaturated fats. Omega-9s aren't classified as essential as they can be made by the body.

Benefits: Omega-9s can lower cholesterol if used to replace saturated fat in the diet.

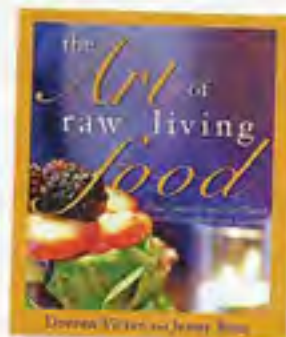
Healthy intake: You'll get your intake correct by default if you concentrate on getting your omega-3 and -6 balance right.

DO SUPPLEMENTS HELP?

Fashionable oil blends, such as Paradox and Udo's Choice, claim to have the perfect balance of omega-3, -6 and -9, but it's only omega-3 that's worth taking, and only then if you don't eat enough oily fish.

Try Healthspan St Clements Cod Liver Oil (£5.45 for 300ml, www.healthspan.co.uk) or, if you're vegetarian, Biona Oxyguard Fresh Cold Pressed Linseed Oil (£5.60 for 250ml, www.goodnessfoodsdirect.co.uk).

Nutrition book of the month



The Art of Raw Living Food by Doreen Virtue and Jenny Ross

(Hay House, £10.99)

The product of an interesting collaboration between Doreen Virtue, a clairvoyant who focuses on work with angels, and Jenny Ross, owner and award-winning chef of a raw-food restaurant in Southern California, 118 Degrees, this book celebrates the physical, spiritual and emotional benefits of a mostly raw diet. It offers a wide range of recipes and tips for creating gourmet meals from raw fruit, veggies and nuts, with flavours from a range of countries, including Mexico, Italy and Asia.

Also out...



Sweet Alternative by Ariana Bundy

(Conran Octopus, £12.99)

Ever thought you could make a fantastic-looking cake without any butter, cream or flour? There's no need for allergy sufferers to feel deprived at dessert time with this great collection of more than 100 inventive recipes from chef Ariana Bundy. Try deep chocolate muffins made with rice flour, make pancakes with chestnut flour and get mouths watering with gluten-free chocolate chip cookies – delish!