

# The skinny on fats

There's more to Omega-3s than most of us know



While a growing list of foods including juice, milk, non-hydrogenated margarine, eggs and bread carry the claim, "source of omega-3 polyunsaturates," the same claim can be made whether the source of omega-3 is DHA, EPA or ALA. This nuance puts the onus on health-conscious shoppers to ensure the omega-3 source is fish oil. PHOTO: ISTOCKPHOTO.COM

The message has been clearly communicated; omega-3 fatty acids are an important part of a healthy diet.

What is less clear to consumers is that there are three types of omega-3 fats, which don't all come from the same food sources or play the same role in our health.

Omega-3 is an umbrella term for three different dietary fatty acids: Alpha-linolenic acid (ALA), Eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA) and Docosa-

hexaenoic acid (DHA).

According to Melodie Yong, a Vancouver-based registered dietitian and Heart Centre operations leader at St. Paul's Hospital, "ALA is considered the parent omega-3 fatty acid because it helps form EPA and DHA."

Cara Rosenbloom, director of Clinical Nutrition at MDDirect and author of the website [www.wordstoeatby.ca](http://www.wordstoeatby.ca), says ALA is considered an essential fat because our bodies can't make it on their own, yet it is

required for healthy living. "ALA is an important component of all of the cells in our body," she says.

The daily required intake of ALA for men is 1.6 grams and for women is 1.1 grams, going up to 1.4 grams in pregnant women and 1.3 grams in breastfeeding women.

ALA can be found in plant sources like flax, canola and soy, and has been shown to have some health benefits. "ALA has been shown to reduce overall mortality, as

well as the incidence of cardiovascular disease," says Ms. Yong.

She says the stronger evidence, however, is for the health benefits of DHA and EPA.

"Unfortunately, ALA is not very efficient as a building block for DHA and EPA, so it is important for us to find DHA and EPA through other sources," says Ms. Rosenbloom, given that only about five per cent of ALA is converted into EPA and DHA.

EPA and DHA have been studied for their beneficial effects on heart disease, cancer, arthritis, depression and asthma, to name just a few. DHA is also important for development of the brain and retina, and for neurological functioning and cognitive development.

"The studies with the best evidence, though, are regarding heart health," says Ms. Rosenbloom.

"The Dietitians of Canada and the American Dietetic Association all recommend about 0.5 grams or 500 milligrams of DHA and EPA a day," Ms. Rosenbloom says.

According to Ms. Yong, DHA and EPA are grouped together in terms of recommendations because, "when it comes to fish, you are getting a

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combination of both."

DHA and EPA can be found in fatty fish such as herring, salmon, sardines, mackerel and even oysters. "The oilier, cold-water fish," says Ms. Yong.

Canadians are recommended to eat two to three servings of fatty fish a week, but both dietitians say, in general, we do not eat that much fish.

People can either supplement their DHA and EPA intake by taking an oil or capsule, or they can hit the grocery store and find foods enriched with fish oil.

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"If you're trying to protect your heart and you don't consume an omega-3 that is DHA or EPA, then you're not achieving your goal," says Ms. Rosenbloom.

Ms. Yong agrees: "Out of all the foods that you can eat to reduce the risk of heart disease, the EPA and DHA omega-3 fatty acids are it." ■

Omega 3 fats at a glance. Adding omega-3 fatty acids to your healthy diet is easy and can be delicious. The bottom line is every little bit counts.

**How to get 1.1 grams of ALA:**

- 1/2 tsp. of flax oil
- 2 tsp of ground flaxseed
- 3 tbsp of walnuts
- 2 tbsp of hemp seed
- 1 tbsp of canola oil
- 1 tbsp of certain brands of enriched, soft, non-hydrogenated margarine

**How to get 500 milligrams of EPA and DHA:**

- Look for foods that have added EPA and DHA such as: non-hydrogenated margarine, eggs, milk and yogurt
- Fatty fish such as salmon, rainbow trout and mackerel. Canada's Food Guide recommends that adults eat at least two 75-gram servings a week
- Daily supplements containing 500 milligrams of EPA and DHA

**Health benefits of omega-3 fatty acids, particularly EPA and DHA:**

- Lowering the risk of sudden death caused by cardiac arrhythmias
- Reducing the blood's tendency to clot
- Slightly lowering blood pressure
- Reducing blood triglyceride levels, which can contribute to coronary heart disease

**Research also suggests that omega-3 fats may have a beneficial role in:**

- Inflammatory diseases (asthma, inflammatory bowel disease, stiffness due to rheumatoid arthritis)
- Eye problems affecting sharpness of vision
- Mental health disorders (depression, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, bipolar disorder)

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