

What's So Essential About Omegas?

The scoop on these healthy fats—and how you can best get them.

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WHAT THEY ARE

Essential fatty acids (EFAs)—including omega-3s and omega-6s—are polyunsaturated fats that are a critical part of cell membranes and provide a variety of health benefits to help your body function properly. Because EFAs are vital to your health (hence the name “essential”), it's important that you get enough of them. The catch? Your body can't produce EFAs on its own—you need to get these good-for-you fats from food or supplements.

WHY YOU NEED THEM

Among other functions, fat carries vitamins A, D, E and K through your body, keeps skin healthy, and promotes good vision. Specifically, essential fatty acids benefit your brain, heart and metabolism, playing important roles in processes like inflammation and blood clotting.

Omega-3: These powerhouse EFAs improve heart health, boost brain function, support infant brain development, help with weight management, promote bone density, decrease liver fat and reduce inflammation.

Omega-6: These fatty acids provide energy, enhance bone health, decrease nerve pain, maintain a healthy reproductive system and encourage muscle health.

WHERE YOU CAN BEST GET THEM

Omega-3: Look to fatty, cold-water fish such as salmon, sardines, tuna, bluefish, herring, mackerel and black cod. Omega-3 fortified eggs are another option, as well as vegetarian sources like walnuts and flaxseed. But your best bet? Fish and seafood.

Omega-6: Go-to healthy sources include plant-based oils (think safflower, grape-seed, walnut and extra-virgin olive oil), and seeds and nuts like sunflower seeds, pecans and pine nuts.

STRIKE THE RIGHT BALANCE

Aim for the right balance of omega-6 and omega-3 fatty acids. In the Western world, most people eat plenty of omega-6s because of oil-based cooking, but not enough omega-3s. Too much omega-6 might contribute to chronic diseases, such as asthma, cancer and obesity. Health experts recommend a dietary ratio of omega-6 to omega-3 fatty acids of 3:1 or less. Research suggests that a high omega-6/low omega-3 diet increases inflammation, while a diet with a balanced level of these fats decreases inflammation.

There are also omega-9 fats, but these are not “essential” because our bodies can synthesize them from things we eat, and we don't have to depend on direct dietary sources to obtain them. The main omega-9 is oleic acid, found in olive, canola, peanut and sunflower oils.