

Make Room for Omegas

These essential fatty acids are crucial for your heart, brain, skin, mood and metabolism. Here's how to make sure you're getting the right amounts. BY PEGGY HALL



Do your eyes, brain and heart a big favor by snacking on a handful of omega-3-packed walnuts or pumpkin seeds.

Essential fatty acids (EFAs) are just that – essential. The body can't manufacture them on its own, so it must rely on a steady supply from dietary sources. "Fats are major nutrients, just as protein and carbohydrates are," explains Udo Erasmus, PhD, co-author of *Omega 3 Cuisine* (Alive Books, 2008). "Every cell, gland, organ and tissue in your body needs essential fatty acids to function properly." Heart disease, stroke, diabetes and depression can all be helped with the proper balance of essential fatty acids. These fats also have a beneficial effect on skin conditions, arthritis, inflammatory bowel disease and brain health. "Consuming the right amounts of these essential fats also appears to improve weight management and fat-burning," adds Erasmus.

Omega-3s vs. Omega-6s

There are two types of essential fatty acids: omega-3s and omega-6s. (Omega-9s are another type of fatty acid, but are not considered essential because the body can manufacture them from other fats.) Omega-3 fatty acids tend to have anti-inflammatory properties and are present in cold-water fish, such as salmon, herring, tuna and sardines, in the form of EPA (eicosapentaenoic acid) and DHA (docosahexaenoic acid). Flaxseeds, walnuts and other seeds, nuts, oils and leafy greens are rich in the omega-3 fatty acid ALA (alpha-linolenic acid). The body converts ALA into EPA and DHA as needed, which is good news if you're not fond of fish. Omega-6 fatty acids tend to be pro-inflammatory, which is not necessarily bad, since inflammation is needed in times of tissue repair and healing. Omega-6s are found in corn oil, safflower oil, sunflower oil and soybean oil as LA (linoleic acid) and are generally quite abundant in the typical American diet.

Eating large amounts of processed, packaged or fast foods prepared with omega-6 oils can lead to a deficit of omega-3s. This imbalance can, in turn, contribute to long-term diseases such as heart disease and arthritis. Thus, it's critical to maintain a



RICH SOURCES OF OMEGA-6s:

- Evening Primrose oil
- Borage oil
- Sesame seeds and sesame oil
- Sunflower seeds and sunflower oil
- Canola oil
- Soybeans and soybean oil
- Dairy products and red meat



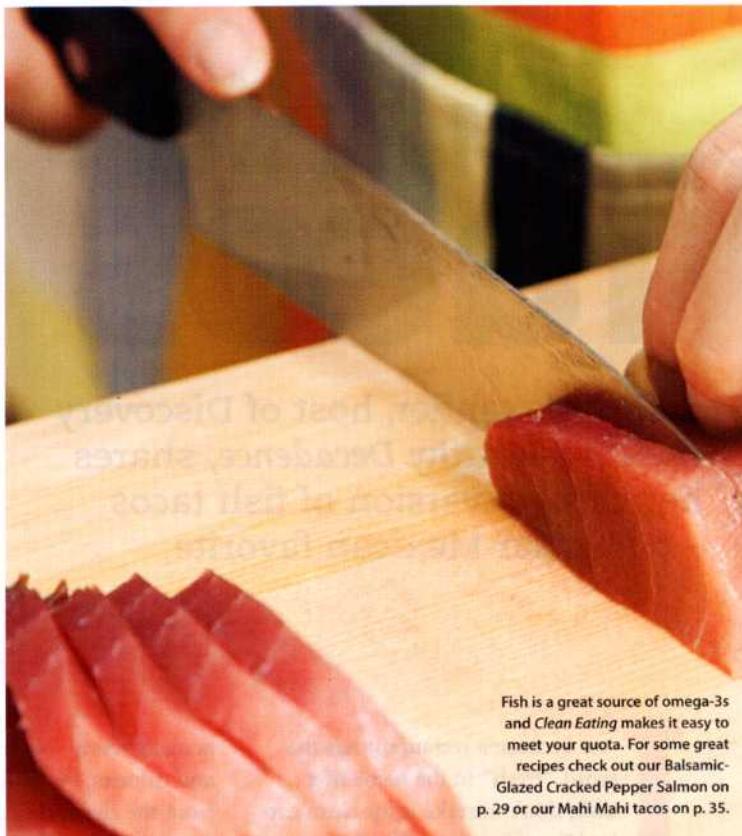
RICH SOURCES OF OMEGA-3s:

- Wild Alaskan Salmon
- Chunk light tuna
- Sardines
- Pacific halibut (wild-caught is best)
- Atlantic herring
- Flaxseeds and flaxseed oil
- Hempseeds and hempseed oil
- Walnuts and walnut oil
- Pumpkin seeds
- Chia seeds
- Krill and algae

proper balance of essential fatty acids. Most experts recommend that a ratio of omega-6s to omega-3s be in the range of 2:1, 3:1 or even 4:1. That's right – more omega-6s than omega-3s.

Too much of a good thing?

Omega-3s seem to be all the rage these days. They are added to nutrition bars, cereals, juices – even eggs are enriched with these fatty acids. But can you get too much of a good thing? “Yes,” says Erasmus, “if you rely solely on flaxseeds, for example, for your essential fatty acids and exclude healthy sources of omega-6s like sesame oil or sunflower seeds.” Erasmus recommends two tablespoons of organic, unrefined flaxseeds or flax oil and one tablespoon of sunflower or sesame oil daily for healthy adults. Add another tablespoon of olive oil or natural, unsalted almond butter daily (they contain small amounts of both omega-3s and -6s) and you've balanced your



Fish is a great source of omega-3s and *Clean Eating* makes it easy to meet your quota. For some great recipes check out our Balsamic-Glazed Cracked Pepper Salmon on p. 29 or our Mahi Mahi tacos on p. 35.


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fatty acid intake. That's assuming that you're eating an otherwise healthy diet and have cut back on junk food, fried foods and red meat, all of which can send the ratio of omega-6s to omega-3s soaring to 20:1 or more and set the stage for potential health problems.

What about supplements?

Fish oil supplements are a popular choice for people who want to make sure they are getting enough omega-3 fatty acids, yet there are some concerns about whether taking them is a wise practice. The American Heart Association recommends that only individuals with heart disease or high levels of triglycerides should consider

taking fish oil supplements, and only in consultation with their doctors. Otherwise, healthy adults can obtain sufficient amounts of EFAs through a balanced diet that includes leafy green vegetables, seeds and nuts, and two fish meals per week. Erasmus agrees. “You can get the equivalent of fish oil supplements from plant sources grown in a controlled environment. You can get them unrefined and free of dioxins.” And remember, your body can convert plant-based ALA into EPA and DHA when needed.

Bottom line: Check with your doctor to see if you're a candidate for taking fish oil supplements. Because they can thin the blood, fish oil supplements should never be combined with aspirin or other blood-thinning medications. 

*For more information, visit americanheart.org.

Are You Lacking the Essentials?

The proper balance of omega fatty acids may help to:

- Improve skin and hair
- Reduce blood pressure
- Balance blood sugar
- Lower cholesterol
- Support bone health
- Promote healthy joints
- Relieve PMS symptoms
- Ease depression
- Reduce the risk of cancer
- Boost brain function and memory