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Supplement focus Omega-3

The health benefits of this essential fatty acid are far-reaching, and include boosting brain power and protecting the heart

What is it?

A special type of fat that has a range of health benefits. But a study in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* found the average intake today is half what we were consuming at the start of the nineteenth century. Experts believe this is because we eat less fish and seeds, two of the main omega-3 sources.

How do I use it?

You can increase levels in your diet by eating oily fish such as salmon, mackerel, sardines, trout and fresh (but not tinned) tuna. For vegetarians, a less potent form of omega-3 is found in flaxseeds, pumpkin seeds and walnuts, plus marine algae (which you can buy as a supplement). Certain eggs also contain omega-3, from the hens being fed flaxseeds.

How much do I need?

There is no government-set recommended daily intake, but for optimal health, 1000mg a day is suggested. If you don't regularly eat fish or seeds, you can take a purified fish oil supplement. Or take 2000-3000mg a day of flaxseed oil.

How can it help me?

- **Heart health** Omega-3 fats have been found to protect against heart disease, reduce cholesterol and lower blood pressure. A review published in the *British Medical Journal* in 2005 recommended anyone with heart disease or high levels of cholesterol or fat in the blood have 2-4g of omega-3 daily.
- **Depression** In four recent trials published in medical journals, patients taking omega-3 supplements experienced an average improvement of 51 per cent – more than double the score achieved by anti-depressants.
- **Joint pain** In 2007, the journal *Pain* published a review of 17 trials assessing the pain-relieving effects of omega-3. It reduced pain by an average of 29 per cent, morning stiffness by 43 per cent and painkiller dependence by 40 per cent.
- **Brain function** Thousands of studies support the mental benefits of omega-3 for all ages. Brain development and IQ can be enhanced in babies; behavioural problems reduced in children; and supplementation can protect against cognitive decline in the elderly.

Are you omega-3-deficient?

- Do you have dry skin?
- Is your hair dry or do you suffer with dandruff?
- Is your memory getting worse?
- Do you have any learning difficulties?
- Do you get excessively thirsty?
- Do you have any inflammatory health

problems such as arthritis or eczema?

- Do you have high blood pressure or high cholesterol levels?
- Do you suffer with water retention?

If you answer yes to one or more of these questions, then you may not be getting enough omega-3 fats in your diet.