

RUNNER'S WORLD

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Nutrition & Weight Loss :Essential Foods



Get Your Omega-3s

Omega-3s can help your heart, lungs, and joints. Here's how to get all you need.

By Phillip Rhodes

The next time you're shopping for ibuprofen or some other anti-inflammatory, consider picking up a couple of **salmon fillets** while you're at it. Your achy knees will thank you.

For some time, the popular fish has been viewed as one of the best dietary sources of omega-3 fatty acids, a group of polyunsaturated fats that is more commonly connected to heart health. But new research now links the anti-inflammatory properties of omega-3s--which are also found in other fatty fish and plant-based foods like walnuts and flaxseed--to the relief of joint pain associated with arthritis or exercise.

In fact, "scientific evidence is leading us to believe that omega-3s may not only alleviate joint pain, but may also prevent it," says Dawn Jackson Blatner, R.D., a dietitian with **Northwestern Memorial Hospital Wellness Institute** in Chicago and a spokesperson for the American Dietetic Association. "Omega-3s are one of the key nutrients every runner should have in their diet." And not just for pain relief. Research has also shown that omega-3s may help prevent exercise-induced asthma. For some people, vigorous exercise can trigger a narrowing of the airways, restricting airflow. In a study from Indiana University, three weeks of fish-oil supplementation helped subjects extinguish airway inflammation and improve postexercise lung function by 64 percent.

A Natural Painkiller

At the forefront of the omega-3/joint-pain research is Joseph Maroon, M.D., a neurosurgeon at the University of Pittsburgh and an Ironman competitor. Since 2004, he has conducted several clinical studies that show omega-3s to be as effective as prescription medication at easing arthritis-related joint pain. One of his studies supplied 1,200 milligrams of DHA and EPA--two forms of omega-3s that seem to be the most effective--to 250 men and women

with neck or back pain. After a month, 59 percent of those who popped fish-oil pills were free enough of pain to discontinue their use of nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs). Earlier this year, Canadian researchers bolstered Maroon's findings. Their analysis of 17 studies suggests that omega-3s effectively reduce joint-pain intensity and the number of tender joints.

"Whether by running or other forms of stress or 'injury,' our bodies are always producing inflammatory substances," says Dr. Maroon. Omega-3s counter that production, Maroon adds, by enhancing the creation of the natural anti-inflammatory prostaglandin E3, thus reducing the body's level of tissue inflammation. Reduce inflammation and you hurt less and heal faster.

The Best Omega-3s

Currently, there is no recommended daily amount for omega-3s the way there is for vitamin C and other nutrients. (The government is waiting until more research confirms omega-3s' broad health benefits.) However, the [Institute of Medicine](#), the research group that supplies the information on which dietary guidelines are built, suggests consuming 1.1 to 1.6 grams of omega-3s per day. Other groups, such as the [American Dietetic Association](#) and the [American Heart Association](#), advocate two servings of fatty fish per week.

"Eating fish is the simplest way to get what you need," says Jackson Blatner. Fish are the richest dietary sources of DHA and EPA. All fish contain these forms of omega-3s, but salmon is the best source, followed by herring and sardines. (Salmon has high levels of omega-3 fatty acids because it eats a lot of krill fish, which eat algae, which is high in omega-3s.) Swordfish is also high in omega-3s, but it and other heavy, predatory fish (such as shark and mackerel) also may contain high levels of mercury. High mercury levels have also been detected in albacore, so when buying canned tuna, choose chunk light, which comes from skipjack tuna. Many nutritionists say that omega-3s trump the mercury concern. "The health benefits of fish far outweigh the risks," says Jackson Blatner.

Fish-oil supplements are a convenient option, especially for people with chronic joint pain and certain heart conditions. But as with any supplement, be sure to buy right. "Fish-oil pills vary on quality, purity, and concentration," says Maroon. Look for a supplement with 400 milligrams EPA and 200 milligrams DHA. If you experience an unpleasant aftertaste (a.k.a. "fish burp") a half hour or so after taking fish oil, choose a capsule with an enteric coating (look for it on the label); it will stay intact long enough to be digested in your small intestine rather than your stomach. Freezing your fish-oil pills or taking supplements that contain enzymes called lipases may also mitigate fish burp.

Flaxseed, walnuts, and canola oil also contain high levels of omega-3s. But the type of omega-3s in plant sources (ALA) is less effective than those found in fish because the body must convert ALA to the other two forms (DHA or EPA). And since the body can only process three to five percent of the ALA you eat, a serving of walnuts, which has 2.5 grams, only provides about .12 grams of omega-3s. That said, if you don't eat fish, consuming omega-3s through plant sources is still worthwhile because the more ALA in your system, the more your body will convert to DHA or EPA.

The increasingly ubiquitous omega-3-fortified foods typically contain only a small amount of the nutrient, so it's best to use them as an addition to your intake rather than as the main source. A typical omega-3-fortified egg, for example, contains about 100 milligrams--a fraction of your daily need. Look for sources that use fish oil to enrich their products, since this source of omega-3s is linked to the most health benefits to date.

And that's no fish story.

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