

Q. I've been a vegetarian for about 30 years. Just recently my doctor told me to eat salmon at least once a week. What can I do instead?

A. Your doctor is probably interested in you eating more foods high in **omega-3 fatty acids** (n-3FAs), of which fish is an excellent source. Research shows that n-3FAs are helpful in preventing heart disease and stroke, may be helpful in managing other inflammatory diseases such as lupus and arthritis, and is used in treating depression. Omega-3 fatty acids are also very important to the brain and nervous system and are thus very important for cognitive development in growing children.

Omega-3 Fatty Acids



Fish is a healthy food. A combined analysis of several large population studies found that people who ate fish (such as salmon, herring, mackerel, anchovies, or sardines), at least 6 oz/week, cut their risk of dying from heart disease by 36%.¹ People who already had heart disease also benefitted from eating fish. One large study found that people who had already survived a heart attack dropped their risk of death from heart disease by 25% by eating a gram of n-3FAs daily (mostly from fish oil supplements).²

One concern is the high content of mercury or other contaminants found in some fish. The cold water fish (listed above) have low levels of contaminants. Fish with high levels of mercury include Atlantic mackerel, shark, swordfish, and tile fish. You may also want to limit white albacore tuna to less than 6 ounces per week.

Omega-3 fatty acids come in two major forms. One form of n-3FAs is DHA and EPA which are found primarily in fish and in some eggs (from chickens fed high sources of n-3FAs).

The other form is from vegetable sources. It is called alpha-linolenic fatty acid (ALA). The body converts ALA into DHA and EPA in the body, but we are not sure how much. Both forms of n-3FAs are good for your health – especially for heart and inflammatory diseases. ALA is found primarily in canola and soy vegetable oils, ground flaxseed (1 rounded tablespoon meets daily requirements), and walnuts. ALA is also found in Brussels sprouts, kale, spinach, and dark leafy greens. You have to eat more of the greens to get your needs but that's good for your health too!

In Harvard's Nurses' Health Study (which included 76,000 women), those eating the most ALA (top 40%) – when compared with those eating the least (bottom 20%) – had a 38% to 40% lower risk of sudden cardiac death³ even after adjusting for DHA and EPA and other coronary risk factors.

In the Health Professional Follow-up Study of over 43,000 men, ALA intake was protective against heart attacks and death from heart attacks. For each 1% increase in intake in

ALA, the risk of a heart attack dropped by 59% (even after adjusting for other fats in the diet and other coronary risk).⁴ In this study, ALA was a better protector from heart attacks than was DHA or EPA.

Dr. Frank Sacks, professor of nutrition at Harvard School of Public Health, says that if you are a vegetarian getting plenty of ALA in your diet through nuts, flaxseed meal, and healthy fats such as canola and soy oils, you probably get enough n-3FAs without eating fish or taking a supplement.

If you want to increase DHA and EPA in your diet, eat an egg each day that is high in DHA and EPA (the label will tell you if the eggs are good sources). Dr. Walter Willett in his research feels that an egg a day will not raise the risk of coronary heart disease (except in diabetics).⁵ If you are a vegan, there is a source of algal-derived DHA (from seaweed) but it has no EPA. Another supplement is fish oil. For persons not used to eating fish, this is often more acceptable. If you buy fish oil supplements, look for the symbol (USP) which ensures a standard for quality and that it doesn't contain high levels of mercury. If you've been a vegetarian most of your life and you want to try eating fish, try adding lemon juice to your salmon or other cold water broiled fish, or add tarter or other sauces that help mask the taste. Eating the whole fish also gives you protein and other good nutrients not found in fish oils.

Personally, as a lifelong vegetarian, I have chosen to get my n-3FAs primarily from ALA. I eat a serving of walnuts or add a rounded tablespoon of ground flaxseed to my steel-cut oats daily. I also eat lots of dark leafy greens and use canola and soy oil salad dressings. Occasionally I eat an egg that is high in DHA and EPA.

Now, the choice is up to you. Just be sure to eat one good source of n-3FAs every day.

References:

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