

ABCs of Omegas

And how to get your kids to eat them

Countless studies have concluded that the omega-3 fatty acids found in fish oil and algae are vital for a child's brain, eye, and nervous system development. The evidence is overwhelming enough for omega 3s to be routinely added to infant formulas, based on the brain's composition of 60 percent fat as well as the vital role fats play in forming healthy cell membranes.

But the benefits of omega 3s don't stop when your child graduates from the crib. Toddlers, tweens, teens, and young adults also require fatty acids as their bodies and brains continue to grow. Recent research indicates that omega 3s may play a role in reducing the impact of asthma, and that they may provide additional cognitive benefits for children with learning difficulties.

In a 2013 study published by the American Journal of Clinical Nutrition, researchers at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill analyzed 20 years of dietary habits recorded by 4,162 Americans ages 18 to 30. Participants had a history of asthma at the beginning of the study. The researchers found a significantly lower occurrence of asthma over two decades in subjects who regularly consumed omega 3s.

In 2012, researchers at the University of Oxford studied a group of "underperforming" healthy schoolchildren, ages 7 to 9, who had scored lower than the 33rd percentile in standardized reading tests. Half the group was given 600 milligrams (mg)/day of docosahexaenoic acid (DHA) derived from algae, while the control group was given a placebo made from corn/soybean oil.

The DHA supplement group recorded significant improvements in reading performance. Parents also reported fewer behavioral problems.

The Oxford study is notable because most previous omega-3 classroom studies have focused on children diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or developmental coordination disorder (DCD).

"DHA supplementation appears to offer a safe and effective way to improve reading and behavior in healthy but underperforming children from mainstream schools," researchers concluded.

Flavors for All

Making the decision as a parent to add fish oil to your child's diet is one thing, but getting them to ingest it can be a challenge.

"Very few children can tolerate swallowing pills," says Keri Marshall, ND, a naturopathic doctor who serves on the Natural Medicine Journal editorial board. "I never let a child leave my office without first tasting something I recommend. It's important for kids to understand why they are taking a supplement, but if it doesn't taste good, there's no way they are ever going to eat it."

Kids' aversion to eating fish and products that taste or smell like fish remains a huge obstacle. Catering to these finicky tastebuds, the nutritional supplements industry has developed a full slate of omega-3-enhanced products that seem like they came off a dessert menu. Consider exploring these options from different manufacturers:

- Chewable softgels and jellies: These DHA supplements come in ice cream-like flavors such as "orange cream" and are also available in single-serving packages for kids on the go.
- Chocolate milk: Some organic brands of chocolate milk have added DHA.
- Drops: Flavored liquid drops can be mixed with any food or beverage.
- Drink mix/powders: Your children will think they are drinking lemonade or fruit punch.
- Gummies: Forget about just gummy bears. Nearly every creature in the animal kingdom shows up in omega-3 bottles in a variety of fruit flavors.
- Puddings: Pudding tubes with DHA look very similar to squeezable yogurt packages.

- Smoothies: DHA-enhanced fruit shakes also sometimes come in squeezable tubes.
- Snack bars: Bars fortified with omega 3s are easy to take on the go. Gluten-free options may be available.

As with any vitamins, supplements, or medications, keep all forms of omega 3s in a secure cabinet out of reach of children. The fact that some of these forms of fish oil taste like sweet drinks or desserts may create the temptation to consume too much. There is still no consensus about recommended omega-3 dosages for children, so consult your child's healthcare provider before giving more than one of these products at a time.

Hook Into Safer Seafood

When it comes to adding omega 3s to a diet, seafood is often the source of choice. Yet much of today's catch is filled with pollutants like PCBs and mercury, which undo much of the nutritional good that they supply—and then some, especially when it comes to growing children.

In a recent study conducted by the Bio-research Diversity Institute, 84 percent of the fish sampled were safe enough to eat only once a month. There's also the issue of sustainability—85 percent of all seafood fisheries are overfished or have collapsed. That said, there are ways to eat safe and sustainable seafood. Here's how:

Use the overfished = over-poisoned rule. Research from the University of Arizona found that the more overfished a given species is, the greater its mercury content is likely to be. Sustainably harvested species of seafood are generally safer to eat.

Eat smaller. Unsafe substances accumulate in seafood over time. This means that big fish like tuna, which take years to mature, have higher levels of contaminants than smaller fish with shorter lifespans like sardines and anchovies.

Pick well-farmed seafood. They're typically fed a controlled diet and harvested when young, factors that prevent mercury and PCB accumulation. But shop carefully—depending on how and where fish are farmed, they can contain other unsafe toxins like antibiotics and pesticides. Some retailers maintain strict seafood supplier standards to prevent such contamination.

Look for an eco-label. Sustainable seafood certification from an organization like the Marine Stewardship Council or Friend of the Sea can guide you to better seafood choices at the market. But do your research first to make sure any seal of approval you see is legitimately trustworthy.

Consult a guide. Wallet guides, mobile apps, and other resources tell shoppers what seafood is safe, what's sustainable, and what's not. Find safe seafood resources online from the Marine Stewardship Council, the Monterey Bay Aquarium Seafood Watch, the World Wildlife Fund, and Oceana.

—Alexandra Zissu

SELECTED SOURCES “Docosahexaenoic Acid for Reading, Cognition, and Behavior in Children . . .” by A.J. Richardson et al., PLOS One, 2012 n “Eicosapentaenoic and Docosahexaenoic Acids, Cognition, and Behavior in Children with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder . . .” by C.M. Milte et al., Nutrition, 6/12 n “Intakes of Long-Chain Omega-3 . . . in Relation to Incidence of Asthma Among American Young Adults . . .” by J. Li et al., Am J Clin Nutr, 1/13 n “Omega-3 Polyunsaturated Fatty Acids and Bronchial Inflammation in Grass Pollen Allergy . . .” by R. Kitz et al., Respir Med, 12/10 n Personal communication: Keri Marshall, ND, 6/13