

DIETITIAN/NUTRITIONIST VANESSA JONES LOOKS AT THE WONDERS OF THE DEEP

Would you believe it if someone told you they recently caught several creatures from the sea that, when eaten, can help prevent sudden heart attacks, assist in infant brain development, reduce joint stiffness and pain from rheumatoid arthritis, and may even protect against cancer and help treat depression? This tale may sound a bit fishy, but it's true! In fact, the miraculous creatures in question are none other than fish.

The basic nutritional profile of fish reveals that they are an excellent source of protein, rich in omega-3 polyunsaturated fats, low in 'unhealthy' saturated fats, and low in dietary cholesterol. They are also an excellent source of the minerals iodine, zinc, potassium, phosphorus and in some cases calcium, and are packed with a wide variety of vitamins, especially those of the B group.

Researchers are continuing to discover nutrients and components in fish that are good for our bodies and minds, not to mention our palates! Let's take a look at the key health benefits that have been discovered so far.

THE OMEGA-3 FACTOR

Omega-3 polyunsaturated fatty acids (omega-3 PUFAs) are the star ingredients of fish. Two particular omega-3 PUFAs that are found in fish, namely EPA (eicosapentenoic acid) and DHA (docosahexanoic acid) play an important protective role in heart health. A diet rich in EPA and DHA can significantly reduce our risk of dying from a sudden heart attack. In fact, eating one serve of fish per week has been found to reduce the risk of having a sudden fatal heart attack by 50 per cent.

Marine omega-3 PUFAs help to prevent heart attacks in several ways. Firstly, they help to lower triglyceride levels in the blood. Triglycerides are a type of fat found in our blood that, when present in high levels, increases our risk of heart disease.

Secondly, marine omega-3 PUFAs may reduce our susceptibility to arrhythmia (irregular heart beats), one of the main causes of sudden death after a heart attack.

Thirdly, some studies suggest marine omega-3 PUFAs reduce blood clotting, especially thrombosis, a major cause of heart attack and stroke.

FISH AND PREGNANCY

There are numerous nutritional benefits to be gained from eating fish during pregnancy. However, due to the ongoing and unresolved concerns about exposing unborn infants to mercury, it is recommended that pregnant women (and women considering pregnancy) limit their consumption of some types of fish.

Fish such as shark/flake, ray, swordfish, barramundi, gemfish, orange roughy, ling and southern bluefin tuna tend to accumulate higher levels of mercury because they are large, live longer and are at the top of the food chain.

As a precautionary measure, pregnant women should limit these particular fish to four portions per week (one portion is approximately 150g). Other fish, including canned tuna, can be eaten as often as desired.

Where possible, try to vary the types of fish eaten.

In addition to heart health benefits, marine omega-3 PUFAs appear to be important in normal human development, including infant brain development, and in the prevention and treatment of several other health conditions, including:

ARTHRITIS Clinical trials with marine omega-3 PUFAs consistently show a decrease in morning stiffness and pain associated with rheumatoid arthritis. There are certain substances in the blood which can trigger inflammation of the joints through the immune response. Marine omega-3 fats are believed to decrease this reaction and lessen inflammation of the joints.

CANCER A number of studies have shown an association between a high intake of fish and a reduced risk of cancer of the breast and colon. Once again, marine omega-3 PUFAs appear to be the active ingredients contributing to the protection. But more research needs to be carried out before it can be conclusively stated that eating fish decreases the risk of developing cancer.

DEPRESSION A large study in Finland found evidence that people who ate fish less than once a week ran a 31 per cent higher chance of developing mild to severe depression than people who ate it more often. Interestingly, the evidence was more pronounced for women. It has also been revealed that countries with a higher per-capita fish consumption tend to have lower rates of major depression. Marine omega-3 PUFAs appear to be the contributing ingredient but, again, more research is required before we can say that fish really can make us feel happy.

The National Heart Foundation recommends that we eat at least two fish (preferably oily fish) meals a week.

AMAZING HEALTH BENEFITS OF EATING FISH.

Don't be concerned by the word 'oily', as 100 grams of the fattiest fish contains around the same amount of fat as 200 grams of very lean beef. Oily fish, which tend to have a stronger flavour and darker coloured flesh, are the richest source of marine omega-3 fats.

FISH RICH IN OMEGA-3 FATS

FRESH FISH Atlantic salmon, smoked salmon, swordfish, blue and Spanish mackerel, gemfish, silver perch, pilchards, mullet, yellowtail kingfish, herring, blue-eye and rainbow trout.

CANNED FISH Salmon, sardines, mackerel and, to a lesser extent, tuna. Purchase fish canned in springwater, brine or canola oil.

THE CALCIUM CONNECTION

Calcium deficiency can increase our risk of bone disorders such as osteoporosis (brittle bones). The small edible bones found in canned fish, and in fresh fish such as whitebait, are packed with calcium. If you are guilty of delicately removing the bones from canned fish and feeding them to your cat, consider what you are giving away – little pellets of pure calcium.

Adults need between 800-1000mg calcium a day. A small 100g can of pink salmon with bones provides 300mg calcium and 100g of red salmon with bones provides 200mg. Sardines with bones are also great, with 50g providing 250mg calcium. You will receive a boost of 300mg calcium from 50g of pilchards in tomato sauce, and just 30g of fried whitebait will give you a whopping 260mg calcium.

If the texture of edible fish bones does not appeal to you, crush them up with a spoon and mix them through the fish. You will not even notice they are there – but your bones will! ■

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