



OMEGA-3 FATTY ACIDS DURING PREGNANCY

During pregnancy, your baby gets most of his or her food from the foods you eat and vitamins you take. Omega-3 fatty acids (omega-3s) are an important family of building blocks needed during pregnancy and breastfeeding. The two most important omega-3s are DHA and EPA. Our bodies cannot make these fatty acids, so we have to get them from food.

What Are the Benefits of Omega-3s?

Omega-3s are important to health. They can lower blood pressure and reduce heart diseases and other health problems. Omega-3s improve your baby's eye and brain growth and early development. Taking in enough omega-3s can lower your baby's chances of getting asthma and other allergic conditions. They also may lower your risk of giving birth too early, and of having depression after you have your baby (postpartum depression).

Where Are Omega-3s Found?

Only a few foods contain omega-3s. They are mostly found in fatty fish like salmon, sardines, and trout. Some eggs are high in DHA because of the diet fed to the hens. They are sold as high-DHA eggs, and have about 150 mg of DHA per egg. Omega-3s are also now added to certain foods (fortified) like some brands of milk, juice, and yogurt.

Should I Worry About Eating Certain Fish?

Because of mercury contamination of our oceans, rivers, and lakes, almost all fish contain some mercury. Some fish contain too much mercury. Some fish may also have polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) and dioxin from industrial pollution. High amounts of mercury and PCBs in your body can cause problems with your baby's brain growth, so fish with high levels of these toxins should not be eaten during pregnancy. Check local advisories on the safety of fish from local waters. Fish advisories are available from your local health department and online from state agencies. The health benefits of eating low-mercury fish during pregnancy outweigh the risks, so DO eat safe fish during pregnancy and while you are breastfeeding your baby.

How Can I Make Sure I Eat Fish Safely?

Choose fish that are low in mercury. Remove skin and fat before cooking. Baking, broiling, steaming, or grilling fish lets the fat drain away and reduces PCBs in fish. Do not eat raw fish or shellfish.

How Much Omega-3s Do I Need?

Pregnant women and women who are breastfeeding should get about 200 to 300 mg of omega-3s per day.

How Do I Get Enough Omega-3s?

Because omega-3s stay in the body for a few days, eating two servings of fatty fish per week can give you the 200 to 300 mg per day that you need. One serving is a 6-ounce portion of cooked fish. If you do not eat fish, or do not want to eat it every week, you can get fish oil as a pill or liquid you can swallow. Purified fish oil in pills or liquid form have all PCBs and dioxin removed. Read the label carefully to make sure there are at least 200 mg of omega-3s. Fish oil pills generally do not have side effects, although some women say they have a fishy aftertaste with burping. Cutting down fried and processed foods in your diet will help your body's ability to use the omega-3s you are taking in. Fish liver oils like cod liver oil should be avoided in pregnancy because they can cause dangerous levels of vitamin A in your body.

What Should I Eat to Get Enough Omega-3s During Pregnancy and Breastfeeding?

Eat up to two 6-ounce servings of omega-3 fish per week, except where indicated. Foods are listed in amounts of omega-3s from highest to lowest. During weeks when you do not eat enough fish, take fish oil supplements. Look for fish oil supplements that are purified because they are the safest.

- **High sources of omega-3s** (about 700 mg or more per serving):
 - Salmon
 - Halibut
 - Rainbow trout
 - Canned light tuna
 - Atlantic or pickled herring
 - Pollock
 - Whitefish
- **Moderate sources of omega-3s** (about 150 to 699 mg per serving):
 - Canned tuna, white albacore (limit to 1 serving per week while you are pregnant or breastfeeding)
 - Catfish
 - Alaskan king crab
 - Halibut
 - Flounder for sole
 - Shrimp
 - Atlantic cod
 - Canned blue crabmeat
 - Omega-3 enriched eggs

What Fish Should I Not Eat During Pregnancy and Breastfeeding?

Do **NOT** eat the following fish while you are pregnant:

- Swordfish
- Tilefish (also called golden bass or golden snapper)
- King mackerel
- Shark
- Tuna steaks (fresh or frozen)
- Marlin
- Spanish mackerel
- Orange roughy
- Raw fish

FOR MORE INFORMATION

March of Dimes

www.marchofdimes.com/pnhec/159_55030.asp

United States Environmental Protection Agency

www.epa.gov/fishadvisories/advice/factsheet.html

United States Food and Drug Administration

www.fda.gov/food/resourcesforyou/consumers/ucm110591.htm

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