

Nutrition News

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Fish and Omega-3 Fatty Acids for Heart Health

February is Heart Month, according to the American Heart Association. Taking care of your heart involves many things such as adequate exercise and a healthful diet. The American Heart Association makes several recommendations about a diet that's healthful for your heart, and one of those is eating more fish.

Fish is a good source of protein and, unlike fatty meat products, it's not high in saturated fat. Fish also is a good source of omega-3 fatty acids. Omega-3 fatty acids benefit the hearts of healthy people, as well as those at high risk of – or those who have – cardiovascular disease. Research has shown that omega-3 fatty acids decrease risk of arrhythmias (abnormal heartbeats), which can lead to sudden death. Omega-3 fatty acids also decrease triglyceride levels, slow the growth rate of atherosclerotic plaque and lower blood pressure (slightly).

How often and how much?

The American Heart Association recommends eating fish (particularly fatty fish) at least two times (two servings) a week. Each serving is 3.5 ounces of cooked fish or about 3/4 cup of flaked fish. Fatty fish like salmon, mackerel, herring, lake trout, sardines and albacore tuna are high in omega-3 fatty acids. They contain about 1.5 to 2 milligrams of omega-3 per 3 ounce serving. Catfish and crawfish have about 0.2 to 0.3 grams of omega-3 fatty acids per 3 ounce serving, while shrimp and crabs have about 0.4 grams.

Eating fish, is there a catch?

Some types of fish may contain high levels of mercury, PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls), dioxins and other environmental contaminants. Levels of these substances generally are highest in older, larger, predatory fish and marine mammals.

The benefits and risks of eating fish vary depending on a person's stage of life:

- Children and pregnant women are advised by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration to avoid eating those fish with the potential for the highest levels of mercury contamination (e.g., shark, swordfish, king mackerel or tilefish); to eat up to 12 ounces (two average meals) per week of a variety of fish and shellfish that are lower in mercury (e.g., canned light tuna, salmon, pollock or catfish); and check local advisories about the safety of fish caught by family and friends in lakes, rivers and coastal areas.
- For middle-aged and older men and post-menopausal women, the benefits of fish consumption far outweigh the potential risks when the amount of fish eaten is within the recommendations established by the FDA and Environmental Protection Agency.
- Eating a variety of fish will help minimize any potentially adverse effects due to environmental pollutants.

Five of the most commonly eaten fish or shellfish that are low in mercury are shrimp, canned light tuna, salmon, pollock and catfish. Avoid eating shark, swordfish, king Mackerel or tilefish because they contain high levels of mercury.



Tips for cooking fish

- Enjoy fish baked or grilled. Reduce the amount of added fats and salt when cooking fish. Avoid frying fish. Frying fish adds a lot of extra calories and the wrong type of fat in the diet.
- Choose low-sodium, low-fat seasonings such as spices, herbs, lemon juice and other flavorings in cooking and at the table. Also, use onion and garlic to flavor fish and boost your cardiovascular system with protective phytochemicals.

Source: American Heart Association



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