

## Memorandum

TO: Diabetes Care and Education Dietetic Practice Group (DCE DPG) members

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TOPIC: Reproduction of the education handout *Omega-3 Fatty Acids*

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# OMEGA-3 Fatty Acids

A nutrition resource for living well with diabetes

You may have heard about the benefits of eating foods rich in omega-3 fatty acids. But what does that really mean? Understanding the benefits of omega-3 fatty acids—and learning how to identify them—will help you incorporate a healthy amount of these fats into your meal plan.

## What are omega-3 fatty acids?

Omega-3 fatty acids are an important type of polyunsaturated fat. Three types of omega-3 fatty acids are found in foods and used by the body:

- DHA (docosahexaenoic acid) found in fish and shellfish
- EPA (eicosapentaenoic acid) found in fish and shellfish
- ALA (alpha-linolenic acid) found in plant sources

EPA and DHA are both associated with heart health. The body converts ALA to the fatty acids EPA and DHA, but in smaller amounts and at a much slower rate.

## What are the benefits of a diet rich in omega-3s?

Evidence suggests that omega-3 fatty acids—in the form of DHA and EPA—help maintain a healthy heart and may help reduce the risk of coronary heart disease.

In addition, these heart-healthy fats are needed for proper brain growth and development in infants. (DHA foods are especially important during pregnancy and breastfeeding.)

More research is necessary, but emerging studies indicate that omega-3s may help reduce the risk of certain diseases.



## How many omega-3s do I need to eat?

Generally, it's recommended that most people eat at least 2 servings of fish, especially fatty fish, per week (a serving is 3 to 4 ounces). For individuals who cannot meet this recommendation through foods, or in other specific cases, it may be appropriate for a health care provider to recommend a fish oil supplement.

## What fish have the highest amount of omega-3 fatty acids?

Fatty fish have the highest levels, but all fish contribute some omega-3.\*

Choose:

- Salmon
- Sable fish
- Sardines
- Lake trout
- Mackerel
- Rainbow trout
- Bluefish
- Anchovies
- Herring
- Mussels
- Mullet
- Halibut
- Tuna
- White fish

\* Certain types of fish (tilefish, swordfish, king mackerel, albacore tuna, and shark) have elevated levels of mercury and other contaminants. They should be eaten less often and avoided by children, and women who are pregnant or breastfeeding.

## If I'm not a fish eater, where else can I find foods with omega-3?

- Ground flaxseed
- Walnuts, pecans and other nuts
- Canola oil, soybean oil, flaxseed oil and walnut oil
- Food products with added omega-3s (e.g. yogurt, granola bars, some juices)

## Fortified foods

You may notice information about omega-3 fatty acids on food labels, as more food companies are adding omega-3s to their products. Some of these foods include: specific brands of eggs, peanut butter, buttery spreads, popcorn, and mayonnaise. Read nutrition labels carefully. Many fortified products contain very little omega-3 fatty acid, and some may contain ALA, which your body cannot use as efficiently as the marine types, EPA and DHA.

Each day, look for several ways to increase all three types of omega-3 fatty acids. If you think you're not eating enough, make an appointment with a registered dietitian to help you find creative ways to meet your needs and improve your wellbeing.

*Choose a small handful of walnuts as an easy and delicious way to add omega-3 fatty acids into your meal plan.*

## For delicious ways to increase omega-3 fatty acids in your day, simply:

- Add chopped walnuts and grilled salmon to a salad
- Select or prepare your favorite seafood on the grill
- Substitute fish in one of your favorite chicken recipes
- Try a small handful of walnuts as a snack
- Sprinkle ground flaxseed on your cereal, yogurt or salad
- Prepare a tuna fish sandwich for lunch
- Spread a trans-fat free margarine with added omega-3 on whole-wheat toast

## Resources:

For more information about the amount of mercury in a commercial fish visit:

<http://www.cfsan.fda.gov/~frf/sea-mehg.html>

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