

# NUTRITION



## F A C T S H E E T

### DHA: A Good Fat

---

Not all fats are bad. Eating too many saturated fats and trans fats is not good for your health. But polyunsaturated fats, particularly omega-3 fatty acids, have been shown to promote good health from infancy through adulthood.

#### **What is Docosahexaenoic Acid (DHA)?**

DHA is a long-chain omega-3 fatty acid found throughout the body, especially in the brain and eyes. It is present naturally in specific fatty fish such as salmon, trout, mackerel, sardines and tuna, as well as algal oil, organ meats and breast milk.

Many people confuse DHA with its shorter-chain cousin alpha-linolenic acid (ALA). ALA is an essential fatty acid found mainly in flaxseed, walnuts, canola oil and a few other plant foods. It has different health effects from DHA. The human body is able to convert ALA into DHA in trace amounts. So, it is important to consume DHA directly.

#### **DHA for a Healthy Pregnancy and a Healthy Child**

DHA is important for proper brain and eye development, especially during pregnancy and infancy. Beginning in the last trimester of pregnancy and continuing through the first 2 years of life and beyond, DHA levels in the brain rapidly increase.

Several studies have shown that infants with higher blood levels of DHA score better on tests measuring their brain (or cognitive) and visual function. In the Baylor prospective cohort study, pregnant women randomly received 200 mg DHA per day or placebo through at least 4 months of breastfeeding. The supplemented

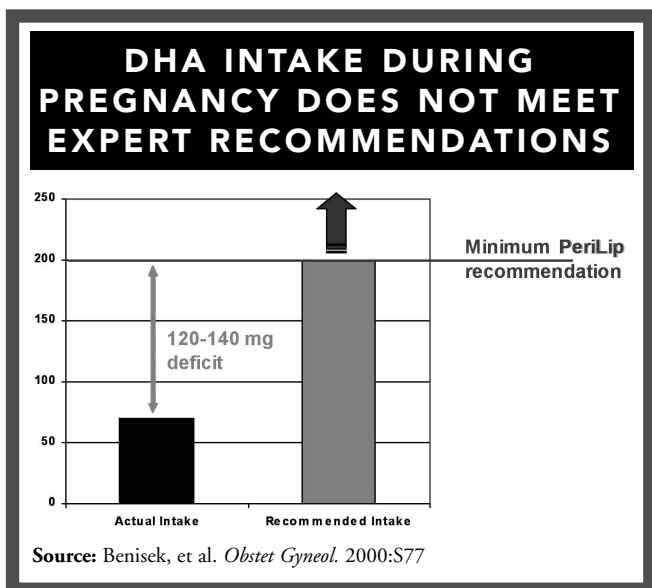
mothers had infants who continued to outperform their placebo counterparts in cognitive testing at 30 months and 5 years, long after the supplementation ended.

A 2007 consensus statement developed by the European Commission research project PeriLip recommends that all pregnant and breastfeeding women consume an average of at least 200 mg of DHA/day. This is to ensure that adequate DHA is deposited in brain and other tissues during critical development periods.

Yet most women in North America don't get enough. Pregnant and breastfeeding women consume only about 60-80 mg of DHA a day.

Women can meet the recommended intake of DHA by consuming two servings of fish, especially fatty fish, per week. According to the Food and Drug Administration, pregnant and breastfeeding women should not eat swordfish, tilefish, king mackerel and shark. Also, albacore tuna should be limited to six ounces per week.

*The contents of this fact sheet have been reviewed by the American Dietetic Association's Fact Sheet Review Board. The appearance of this information does not constitute an endorsement by ADA of the sponsor's products or services. This fact sheet was prepared for the general public. Questions regarding its content and use should be directed to a registered dietitian.*



Breast milk which provides DHA and arachidonic acid (another polyunsaturated fatty acid) is the preferred source of infant nutrition. Because of possible benefits and lack of adverse effects, it is recommended that infants who are not breastfed receive a formula containing both DHA and arachidonic acid.

### DHA is Important for Adults, Too

DHA has a number of health benefits for adults as well.

- DHA is especially good for heart health. DHA has been shown to lower triglycerides, heart rate and blood pressure. A DHA supplement may be helpful to maintain or improve blood lipids. A recent study showed that 1,000 mg of DHA per day can decrease triglyceride levels by 20%. Other research shows that DHA alone and

DHA with EPA (another long-chain omega-3 fatty acid) increases HDL- the “good cholesterol.”

- Studies show that getting about 500 mg a day of DHA and EPA has the most preventative benefit for your heart. This is the amount you would get from eating about 8 ounces of fatty fish a week.
- The American Heart Association recommends that all adults eat fish (especially fatty fish) at least 2 times per week. Adults with heart disease should get about 1 gram per day of DHA and EPA. This can be achieved by eating fatty fish or by taking long-chain omega-3 supplements, in consultation with a physician.
- Active research is in progress to determine the effects of DHA on eye health, age-related macular degeneration, prostate cancer prevention, cognitive function in the elderly, and risk for Alzheimer’s disease. In the Framingham Heart Study, people with the highest levels of DHA were 47% less likely to develop dementia than those with lower levels. An NIH-funded study is currently underway to see whether DHA alone can help people with Alzheimer’s disease stay healthier longer.

### Fish Alternatives

For those who choose not to eat fish, DHA-rich fish oil or algal oil supplements are a good source of DHA. Algal oil is a vegetarian alternative source of DHA that is added to foods, beverages, infant formula and dietary supplements.

For a referral to a registered dietitian and for additional food and nutrition information visit [WWW.EATRIGHT.ORG](http://WWW.EATRIGHT.ORG)

What’s your most valuable source of good nutrition? Registered Dietitians are the experts when it comes to helping people eat well and stay healthy. An RD has the knowledge and expertise to develop an eating plan to meet the needs of all individuals.



[www.eatright.org](http://www.eatright.org) | Your link to nutrition and health™

This Nutrition Fact Sheet has been sponsored by



[www.martek.com](http://www.martek.com)