

Good Fat, Bad Fat: The Facts About Omega-3

(continued)

If you're thinking that maybe the easiest and most low-cal way to get omega-3s is with fish oil capsules, not so fast. Many nutritionists say it's a bad idea.

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"There is something about whole food that when it goes into the body it's more than 90% absorbed, while [with] a supplement you absorb only about 50%," says Sandon.

Moreover, says Sandon, because the components of different foods work together, they may offer a more complete and balanced source of nutrients.

"It could be something more than just the omega-3s in fish that make it so healthy," says Sandon. "It could be the amino acids that provide benefits we are not going to see in fish-oil supplements alone."

And if you're thinking fish-oil capsules will help you avoid the contamination risks of fresh fish, think again. Because supplements are not regulated in the U.S., Sandon says, some may contain concentrated amounts of the same toxins found in fresh fish. And because the oil is so concentrated, the supplements can also produce an unpleasant body odor.

More important, experts say, there is a danger of overdosing on fish-oil supplements, particularly if you take more than the recommended amount. Doing so can increase your risk of bleeding or bruising. This isn't likely to happen when you get your intake from foods.

The one-time fish oil supplements can really help is if you need to reduce your levels of triglycerides, a dangerous blood fat linked to heart disease. The American Heart Association recommends that people with extremely high triglycerides get 2 to 4 daily grams of omega-3s (containing EPA and DHA) in capsules -- but only in consultation with their doctors.

"The key here is to never take these supplements without your doctor's consent," says Magee. "This is not something you want to fool with on your own."

SOURCES: Laurie Tansman, MS, RD, nutrition coordinator, Mount Sinai Medical Center, New York; Lona Sandon, RD, spokeswoman, American Dietetic Association; associate professor of nutrition, University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center, Dallas. Elaine Magee, MPH, RD, consultant, WebMD Weight Loss clinic; author, *The Flax Cookbook* (Marlowe and Company), Northern California; American Heart Association Advisory on Omega-3 fatty acids; Food and Drug Administration Advisory on Fish Consumption.