

HEALTH FORUM

Sell the many lifelong benefits of omega-3's by Evie Hansen

If you sell seafood, you're missing a great sales opportunity if you don't talk to consumers about the health benefits of fish and shellfish. Tell them about the omega-3 fatty acids in seafood and the many ways this substance can protect their health.

Omega-3's are a family of polyunsaturated fats that share a unique chemical structure. The two most prominent omega-3's are known as EPA and DHA. Omega-3's reside in all fish and shellfish, especially "fattier" fish.

Studies show that the protective effects of omega-3 can be achieved by eating seafood twice a week. There are no U.S. dietary recommendations for omega-3 acids, but Health Canada, the Canadian counterpart of the Food and Drug Administration, recommends consuming 1 to 1.5 grams a day.

Omega-3's offer a lifetime of health benefits in several areas:

Infant development. Omega-3's are needed for proper brain and eye development and are an essential nutrient for infants. As babies grow, their brains and nervous systems accumulate DHA for building brain tissue, nerves and retinas. Regular seafood consumption during pregnancy may prolong gestation, reducing incidence of premature birth and increasing mean birth weight.

Psychiatric illness. The anti-inflammatory properties of omega-3's may dampen activity in the immune system that is thought to lead to Alzheimer's disease. Fish oil also may combat a number of serious psychiatric illnesses. Research sponsored by the National Institute of Health links higher consumption of omega-3's to a lower risk of depression and better response to treatment for manic depression and schizophrenia.

Heart disease. Researchers at Boston's Brigham and Women's Hospital in 1996 documented a 50 percent reduced risk of cardiac arrest in patients who ate seafood once a week, compared with subjects who ate seafood only once a month.

Omega-3 fatty acids have been shown to protect against heart disease by inhibiting the formation of blood clots, preventing potentially deadly heartbeat abnormalities, lowering triglyceride levels that can increase the risk of heart attacks if elevated, and restricting growth of plaque in arteries.

Dr. David Sosovick, co-director of the University of Washington Cardiovascular Health Research unit in Seattle, reported exciting research results to the American Heart Association this February.

A study of nearly 4,000 men and women aged 65 years and older found that those who ate at least one serving of fatty fish every week were 35 percent less likely to die of a heart attack. Sosovick says even short-term consumption of fatty acids can benefit heart function.

Some cancers. A high level of omega-3's may protect against breast cancer. Omega-3's may help healthy cells resist damage by tumor-producing cells. They may interfere with tumor growth, inhibiting the spread of tumor cells throughout the body.

Arthritis. Consumption of omega-3's is associated with decreased risk of rheumatoid arthritis.

Diabetes. Omega-3 fatty acids may prevent the onset of diabetes, control symptoms and help manage complications.

Clearly, from birth to death, omega-3's play an important role in daily health. That's a message consumers need to hear.

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