

# Omega-3 Fats

## What are omega-3 fats?

Omega-3 fats are a special kind of healthy fat that is needed for human health. Omega-3 fats are an important part of our diet because our bodies do not produce them. There are 3 types of omega-3 fats:

**ALA** (alpha linolenic acid)



**DHA** (docosahexaenoic acid)

**EPA** (eicosapentaenoic acid)

- ALA is a form of omega-3 that is changed in the body into the DHA and EPA form.
- DHA is very important for **pregnant and breastfeeding** women because it helps to promote healthy brain, nerve and eye development in your baby.
- DHA is **important for everyone including children** and has been shown to help prevent heart disease and improve the immune system.

## Food Sources of Omega-3 Fats

### **DHA and EPA** (best sources):

- Fish and shellfish
- DHA fortified milk
- DHA fortified eggs



### **ALA** (good sources):

These foods are good sources of omega-3 but your body has to work to convert it to the DHA form.

- Ground flaxseed\*
- Walnuts
- Canola, flax\*, soybean and walnut oils
- Soybeans and tofu



### **Omega-3 fortified** products (good sources):

Many omega-3 food items are available in stores that have been fortified with flax oil, fish oil or other sources. Be sure to read labels and know the difference between a DHA source versus an ALA source of omega-3. Some products you may find fortified that are rich in omega-3 are:

- **Flax oil fortified orange juice\***
- **Flax oil fortified yogurt\***
- **Flax oil fortified cheese\***
- **Fish oil fortified orange juice**

\*When eaten occasionally in amounts found in foods, flaxseeds and flaxseed oil are safe to eat during pregnancy. A safe amount is up to 3-4 tbsp/day (30 grams) of flaxseed (whole, bruised, cracked, ground, or milled seed) or up to 2 tbsp/day (28 grams) of flaxseed oil.

## Tips for getting omega-3 fats in your diet



- Follow Canada's Food Guide for a well balanced diet. Visit [healthcanada.gc.ca/foodguide](http://healthcanada.gc.ca/foodguide) for more information.
- Eat at least 150 grams (5 ounces) of low mercury fish each week. Some safe choices include salmon, trout, mackerel, herring, sardines, canned light tuna and anchovy. Fish contains omega-3 fats and other important nutrients for a healthy pregnancy and your baby's brain, nerve and eye development.
- Read the label on foods that claim to have omega-3's such as milk, yogurt, soy beverages and eggs. For the best source, choose foods that have added **DHA**. If it says flaxseed, flaxseed oil or canola oil then its not DHA.

### Are fish oil supplements safe?

The best way to get omega-3's is from food. If you choose to take a supplement, read the label carefully. Fish oil supplements that have a Natural Product Number (NPN) are considered safe by Health Canada for pregnant and breastfeeding women.

The NPN on the product label shows that the fish oil supplement is government-approved for safety and quality.

**Avoid** fish liver oil as it contains high levels of vitamin A which can harm your baby.



### How much is safe?

Do not take more than 3 grams of EPA plus DHA daily from supplements. Higher amounts may cause excessive bleeding.

Talk to your health care provider, dietitian or pharmacist for recommendations on using different supplements.

### Where can I get more information?

- EatRight Ontario: 1-877-510-5102 to speak to a registered dietitian
- Parent Talk Line: 1-888-505-6074 or 905-688-3762 ext. 7555 to speak to a public health nurse

#### References:

Health Canada. (2009) Prenatal Nutrition Guidelines for Health Professionals  
Dietitians of Canada. (2009) Practiced Based Evidence in Nutrition (PEN). Is flaxseed safe to consume during pregnancy?