

9 Reasons To Eat Fish Right Now

All things considered, 2013 was not the best year for fish news. We learned all about the dangers of contaminated fish sources and, just in December, a large-scale study published in *The Journal of Nutrition* found some evidence to contradict the commonly held belief that a fish-rich diet improved cognitive function in old age.

But, looking forward, the news gets better: In its first issue of 2014, the *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics* released a new position on fat intake, promoting fatty fish as the go-to source for polyunsaturated fatty acids:

It is the position of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics that dietary fat for the healthy adult population should provide 20 percent to 35 percent of energy, with an increased consumption of n-3 polyunsaturated fatty acids and limited intake of saturated and trans fats.

Two "long-chain" omega-3 fatty acids found in fish, EPA (eicosapentaenoic acid) and DHA (docosahexaenoic acid), are not made by the human body, meaning we need to eat them from a dietary source. Many people get omega-3 fatty acids from plant sources like flax seeds and walnuts, though this type of "good" fat -- alpha-linolenic acid -- only partially converts to EPA and DHA in the body and doesn't have the same amount of research behind it that omega-3s derived from fish do.

Here are nine reasons to eat fish for your health:

1/ Save your eyesight

In a large-scale study of French subjects, researchers found that eating a diet high in omega-3 fatty acids was strongly correlated with a reduced risk of age-related macular degeneration, a degenerative condition in which the central retina becomes damaged. It is the most common cause of lost eyesight in elderly populations.

2/ Cut your risk of a deadly heart attack

Heart disease is the leading cause of death among U.S. adults, but eating a diet rich in fatty fish may help reduce your risk of dying from the disease.

In a meta-analysis of several observational and controlled studies, Harvard School of Public Health professors Dariush Mozaffarian and Eric Rimm discovered that eating fatty fish once or twice a week, for a total omega-3 fatty acid intake of 2 grams, reduced a person's risk of cardiac death by 36 percent and of death from any cause by 17 percent.

Although fish stocks are often polluted with small amounts of toxicants, including mercury, PCBs and dioxins, the American Heart Association states that the potential danger is outweighed by the benefit of fish's nutrient density. They aren't just making that up: A 2011 study, also performed by Mozaffarian, found that among a cohort of 173,000 men and women, those who consumed a great deal of fish and also had the highest concentrations of mercury (as measured by toenail clippings) still had a 15

percent lower risk of heart disease compared with those who had the lowest concentrations -- indicating a diet low in seafood.

3/ Enhance your brainpower

If you've got an important presentation or exam coming up, you might want to chow down on fatty fish before the big day, according to recent research published in PLOS One.

Researchers gave the fish oil-derived omega-3 supplement Lovaza to a group of men and women between the ages of 18 and 25 (when they are considered "at the top of their game," cognitively speaking) and then conducted a well-known test of working memory several times over the course of six months. As the group continued their course of supplements, their performance on the tests steadily improved.

"Before seeing this data, I would have said it was impossible to move young healthy individuals above their cognitive best," lead investigator Bitu Moghaddam, a professor of neuroscience at the University of Pittsburgh, said in a statement.

By comparing results with previous research in rats, the researchers found evidence to suggest that a lack of omega-3 fatty acids can lower stores of the neurotransmitter dopamine, which is linked to working memory.

4/ Halve your risk of rheumatoid arthritis

Rheumatoid arthritis is one of the most common forms of arthritis, which is characterized by the chronic experience of swollen, inflamed and aching joints. But for women, just one serving of fatty fish -- or four servings of lean fish -- could reduce the risk of developing the chronic auto-immune disease, rheumatoid arthritis, according to research gleaned from the Karolinska Institute's Swedish Mammography Cohort Study. The researchers found that of the 32,000 women studied, those who consumed 210 milligrams of omega-3 fatty acids each day -- the equivalent of one weekly serving of fatty fish or four lean fish servings -- were 52 percent *less* likely to develop rheumatoid arthritis when all other factors were controlled.

5/ Improve your baby's development

A healthy diet of omega-3s is also important during pregnancy for the development of a fetus's brain and nervous system. One 2007 study published in The Lancet found that women who consumed fewer than three to four servings of seafood each week (about 12 ounces) were significantly more likely to have children with low levels of verbal IQ and problems with fine motor skills, social development and communication -- all signs of delayed brain development. What's more, the researchers found that the risk of nutrient loss outweighed the ill effects of trace contaminant exposure from the seafood.

6/ Live longer

Eating fish could help you live longer, according to a new review of a long-term cohort study. Researchers found that study participants who had high blood levels of the fatty acids found in fish oil -- docosahexaenoic acid (DHA), eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA) and docosapentaenoic acid (DPA) -- were also 27 percent less likely to die during the 16-year study period and lived an average of two years longer than participants who had low levels of these healthful fats, reported TIME.

7/ Breathe easier

Many parents, fearful of a seafood allergy, stay away from fish during a child's early life. And while any dietary consideration should be made in conjunction with a pediatrician, fish could have one benefit with a limited window of time.

Eating fish during early childhood might be a good way to stave off asthma, according to a Dutch study of 7,210 children. The researchers found that eating fish between the ages of six and twelve months had a 36 percent reduced risk of wheezing by age 4, compared to children who ate fish after age 1 -- or before six months, Reuters reported. This group also had a reduced risk of shortness of breath by 4 years, which is often a symptom of asthma in young children.

While the link requires more study to confirm a benefit, researchers theorize that the same anti-inflammatory benefits that make fish fats a good choice for arthritis prevention may also come in handy for asthma sufferers. Previous research has found a link between consuming fish oil and fewer attacks of a specific type of asthma, exercise-induced bronchoconstriction, in athletes.

8/ Protect your skin

One component of fish oil, EPA, has many great skin benefits, including the ability to regulate the oil production that hydrates skin, according to an article in Health.

What's more, there's some evidence that eating fatty fish helps protect cells from free radical damage caused by the sun's UV-rays. That protection helps preserve skin's collagen, which in turn prevents wrinkles and sagging.

9/ Up your, um, counts

For couples hoping to conceive, a man's diet may matter more than previously thought.

According to a recent Harvard study conducted on 156 men who were part of couples being treated for fertility issues at Massachusetts General Hospital Fertility Center, the 25 percent of participants who ate the most "dark meat" fish (read: fatty types like salmon, bluefish and tuna) [had 34 percent higher sperm counts](#) than those who ate the least amount.

Imported Catfish

Why it's bad: Nearly 90 percent of the catfish imported to the U.S. comes from Vietnam, where use of antibiotics that are banned in the U.S. is widespread. Furthermore, the two varieties of Vietnamese catfish sold in the U.S., Swai and Basa, aren't technically considered catfish by the federal government and therefore aren't held to the same inspection rules that other imported catfish are.

Eat this instead: Stick with domestic, farm-raised catfish, advises Marianne Cufone, director of the Fish Program at Food & Water Watch. It's responsibly farmed and plentiful, making it one of the best fish you can eat. Or, try Asian carp, an invasive species with a similar taste to catfish that's out-competing wild catfish and endangering the Great Lakes ecosystem.

Caviar

Why it's bad: Caviar from beluga and wild-caught sturgeon are susceptible to overfishing, according to the Food & Water Watch report, but the species are also being threatened by an increase in dam building that pollutes the water in which they live. All forms of caviar come from fish that take a long time to mature, which means that it takes a while for populations to rebound.

Eat this instead: If you really love caviar, opt for fish eggs from American Lake Sturgeon or American Hackleback/Shovelnose Sturgeon caviar from the Mississippi River system.

Atlantic Cod

Why it's bad: This one was difficult to add to the "dirty dozen list," says Cufone, because it is so vital to the economic health of New England fishermen. "However, chronic mismanagement by the National Marine Fisheries Service and low stock status made it very difficult to recommend," she says. Atlantic cod stocks collapsed in the mid-1990s and are in such disarray that the species is now listed as one step above endangered on the International Union for Conservation of Nature's Red List of Threatened Species.

Eat this instead: The good news, if you love fish 'n' chips (which is nearly always made with cod), is that Pacific cod stocks are still strong and are one of Food & Water Watch's best fish picks.

American Eel

Why it's bad: Also called yellow or silver eel, this fish, which frequently winds up in sushi dishes, made its way onto the list because it's highly contaminated with PCBs and mercury. The fisheries are also suffering from some pollution and overharvesting.

Eat this instead: If you like the taste of eel, opt for Atlantic- or Pacific-caught squid instead.

Imported Shrimp

Why it's bad: Imported shrimp actually holds the designation of being the dirtiest of the "dirty dozen," says Cufone, and it's hard to avoid, as 90 percent of shrimp sold in the U.S. is imported. "Imported farmed shrimp comes with a whole bevy of contaminants: antibiotics, residues from chemicals used to clean pens, filth like mouse hair, rat hair and pieces of insects," Cufone says. "And I didn't even mention things like E. coli that have been detected in imported shrimp." Part of this has to do with the fact that less than 2 percent of all imported seafood (shrimp, crab, catfish or others) gets inspected before its sold, which is why it's that much more important to buy domestic seafood.

Eat this instead: Look for domestic shrimp. Seventy percent of domestic shrimp comes from the Gulf of Mexico, which relies heavily on shrimp for economic reasons. Pink shrimp from Oregon are another good choice; the fisheries there are certified under the stringent Marine Stewardship Council guidelines.

Atlantic Flatfish

Why it's bad: This group of fish includes flounder, sole and halibut that are caught off the Atlantic coast. They found their way onto the list because of heavy contamination and overfishing that dates back to the 1800s. According to Food & Water Watch, populations of these fish are as low as 1 percent of what's necessary to be considered sustainable for long-term fishing.

Eat this instead: Pacific halibut seems to be doing well, but the group also recommends replacing these fish with other mild-flavored white-fleshed fish, such as tilapia.