

Omega-3 fats

Why are omega-3 fats important?

Omega-3 fatty acids are known as essential polyunsaturated fatty acids because our bodies cannot produce them, making regular dietary intake essential as part of a balanced diet.

Omega-3 fats play a crucial role in supporting the health of our eyes, skin, nervous system and immune system. They are also important for brain and nerve development during pregnancy and childhood, contributing to overall good health and cognitive function.

Types of omega-3 fatty acids include long-chain eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA) and docosahexaenoic acid (DHA), as well as the shorter-chain alpha-linolenic acid (ALA).

Plant foods contain ALA, which can be converted in our bodies to EPA and DHA.

How can vegans get enough omega-3?

As a vegan, you can take several steps to ensure that you are getting enough omega-3 fatty acids.

Make sure that your daily diet includes 1-2 really rich sources of ALA. Examples include walnuts, chia seeds, ground flaxseeds (also known as linseeds) and shelled hemp seeds.

Whilst it is not considered essential, some vegans may wish to take a vegan-friendly omega-3 supplement containing EPA and DHA from microalgae. Although research is limited, these supplements may help to optimize omega-3 status for vegans.

Microalgae supplementation may be particularly beneficial during pregnancy, childhood, and for individuals with a history of cardiovascular disease, although more research is needed to confirm their long-term effects.

Simple food ideas

Now that you have an idea of good sources of vegan omega-3 fatty acids, here are some tasty and practical ways to enjoy them:

- Sprinkle ground linseed (flaxseed) or shelled hemp seeds on overnight oats, porridge or breakfast cereal.
- Blend linseeds, hemp seeds, or chia seeds into smoothies for an easy, nutrient-rich addition.
- Stir chia seeds into fortified yogurt alternatives.

- Use walnuts to add flavour and texture to salads, sprinkle them on top of cereal, or add to peanut butter on toast for a delicious snack.
- Incorporate walnut, linseed (flaxseed), or hemp oils into dips or salad dressings.

Balancing omega-3 and omega-6 fats

Omega-6 fatty acids, present in oils such as sunflower, corn, safflower, and sesame oils, have recently been misrepresented as ‘pro-inflammatory.’

In reality, scientific research shows that omega-6 fatty acids are essential dietary fats with overall anti-inflammatory effects. Including omega-6 fatty acids in your diet can support your cardiometabolic health, although these effects are less pronounced than for omega-3 fats.

It is worth considering that omega-6 and omega-3 fatty acids share similar binding sites on our cells. If your diet is very high in omega-6 fatty acids, omega-3 fatty acids may struggle to bind to our cells and carry out their beneficial effects.

To ensure the omega-3 fatty acids you consume are used efficiently by your body, it can be helpful to moderately reduce your intake of omega-6 fatty acids. This may involve:

- Limiting your intake of high-fat processed foods such as vegan biscuits, cakes, and chocolate, which often contain omega-6 fatty acids.
- Limiting servings of pumpkin seeds or sunflower seeds to around 30 g (¼ cup) per day.
- Using vegetable (rapeseed) oil as your main cooking oil instead of sunflower, corn or sesame oil.

Omega-3 fat tips to take away

- Make sure that your daily diet includes a really rich source of plant-based omega-3, such as chia seeds, ground linseed, shelled hemp seeds or walnuts.
- Use vegetable (rapeseed) oil as your main cooking oil.
- Consider whether microalgae supplementation is right for you.
- Maintain a balanced dietary intake of omega-3 and omega-6 fatty acids for optimal health benefits.

Further information

You might be interested to check out the following webpages:

- [Nutrition overview](#) – comprehensive guidance to help you maintain a balanced and varied healthy diet.
- [Life stages](#) – detailed information on nutritional needs during pregnancy, breastfeeding, childhood, and other age groups.

References

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