

Most of us have now heard of the benefits of omega fatty acids. But do you know if you're getting enough, or whether your balance of omega-3s and omega-6s is doing you good? Here are some tips ...

Essential fatty acids

Essential fatty acids must be obtained from our diet – and they're vital for health. In sufficient quantities the benefits include:

- Protection against heart disease and stroke
- Reduction of the risk of dementia, depression and chronic fatigue
- Reduction in pain
- Support for the immune system

Did you know?

- Nationally, consumption of omega-3 fatty acid has declined by 80% since the war
- The majority of people are deficient in omega-3 fatty acids
- Omega 3s need to be balanced with Omega 6s – an excess of Omega 6 is not good for health

The truth about Omega 3 oils and Omega 6 oils

Today most western diets are very high in Omega-6 fatty acids (found in many vegetable oils). The problem is: most of us have too much Omega-6 in the body and not enough Omega-3.

A typical Western diet contains nearly 10 times more omega-6 than omega-3 oils; largely due to high usage of vegetable oils and seeds (omega-6 sources) and lower oily fish consumption (omega 3s).

This is a problem because the body makes beneficial prostaglandins (which are hormone-like substances) from these essential fatty acids, but not all these prostaglandins are helpful. The 'good' prostaglandins, made from omega 3 fatty acids, help to prevent inflammation and pain (including period pains), regulate the immune system and reduce abnormal blood clotting. The 'bad' prostaglandins made from Omega 6 fatty acids increase inflammation, pain and abnormal blood clotting. That is why having a good ratio of Omega 6 to Omega 3 fatty acids is so important.

Too little Omega-3?

Symptoms of an Omega 3 deficiency can include dry skin, dry hair, depression, poor concentration, weight gain and menstrual irregularity. Your blood can be tested for omega-3; if you know you are deficient, it's time to take action!

Getting Omega-3 from your food

The best source of Omega-3 fatty acid is oily fish. Vegetarian sources are less effective: Also if you get your Omega 3 fatty acids from oils like flax (linseeds) the body has to convert the oil to EPA (which otherwise comes directly from fish) and it is now thought that this conversion is not very efficient. It is estimated that from linseed (flax) oil only 5-10% is converted to EPA.

If you're deficient and eat fish, make it a staple part of your diet. We'd also recommend supplementation to bring your levels up, and a future blood test to check your levels again, and adjust your supplementation accordingly.

A consultation with a [nutritionist](#), including a blood test for omega-3 levels, is a good place to start!