



The facts about omega 3 and omega 6 fatty acids

There are two families of polyunsaturated fatty acids: omega 6 and omega 3.

Most fatty acids can be made in the body. However there are some fatty acids that the body needs to function properly, but which it cannot make. These are described as 'essential' and include the omega 3 fatty acid alpha linolenic acid (ALNA) and the omega 6 fatty acid linoleic acid (LA).

As the body cannot make them, they must be provided by the diet. The body can then convert these fatty acids into other, longer chain fatty acids that are necessary for good health. Both families are needed in small, amounts - a minimum of 1% energy from omega 6 linoleic acid and 0.2% energy from alpha linolenic acid for optimal health.

Sources of omega 6 fatty acids include meats, cereals, spreads and vegetable oils. The omega 3 fatty acid ALNA is found in nuts, seeds and flax. Our bodies are not very good at converting ALNA into the long chain omega 3 fatty acids DHA and EPA which seem to protect against cardiovascular disease and may have other health benefits. So it is important to include oil-rich fish such as mackerel, salmon, tuna, herring and sardines - which are a good source of EPA and DHA - in the diet.

The Food Standards Agency recommends that we eat at least two portions of fish per week, one of which should be oil-rich. This is due to the beneficial health properties that consuming oil-rich fish containing long chain omega 3 provide.



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