

The wonders of omega-3 fatty acids

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Omega-3 fatty acids are once again in the news and it's another positive story about these healthy fats. In a study published in this weeks Journal of the American Medical Association, researchers from California found that omega-3 fats may help slow down the aging process. The researchers focused on telomeres which are sequences of DNA that form a protective cap (sort of like the plastic tips that are at the end of shoelaces) as cells divide. These telomeres get shorter every time a cell divides and this shortening is thought to be linked to some of the effects of aging.

The researchers studied a group of 608 adults over a six-year period who had been previously been diagnosed with heart disease. They found that the people who had the highest blood levels of DHA (docosahexaenoic acid) and EPA (eicosapentaenoic acid), the two omega-3 fats found in fish and fish oils, had the slowest rate of telomere shortening over time, compared to those with the lowest levels.

This slowing of the telomere length is associated with slowing of the biological aging. So, it's possible that this is another part of the role that omega-3 fats play in protecting us against some of the aging processes including heart disease.

We already know a lot about the role of omega-3 in heart health. One of the functions is to help reduce stickiness of your blood so it's less likely to clot, an important factor in lowering risk of strokes and heart attacks. They also lower triglycerides, reduce cardiac arrhythmias and offer protection from sudden cardiac death. It has been shown that people who regularly eat more fish have lower rates of heart disease. There is also an association with omega-3's protecting against inflammation, another important risk factor. Canada's Food Guide recommends eating at least 2 servings of fish each week to help lower risk of cardiovascular disease.

The best sources of DHA and EPA are the fatty fish such as salmon, mackerel, herring, sardines, trout as well as fish oils. A 3-oz. (90 gram) serving of baked Atlantic salmon has about 1500 mg of DHA and EPA combined.

When it comes to omega-3's most people count on getting them from fish like salmon or trout. But, for a change, you might try occasionally having some sardines. Now, before you wrinkle up your nose, here are some facts about this fish. A 3-oz. serving of canned Atlantic sardines has about 850 mg of DHA and EPA combined as well as 22 grams of protein, about 340 mg of calcium (more than a glass of milk — the calcium comes from the small edible bones in the sardines) as well as generous amounts of iron, vitamins B12 and E, potassium, selenium and even a little vitamin D. So they are loaded with nutrients. And, they are small so they are low in mercury and also are on the list of environmentally friendly fish. Best to buy them canned in water but if you buy them canned in oil, drain off some of the oil so you'll lower the fat. You can also buy them canned in tomato sauce for a different flavour. I love sardines and think they taste great in a sandwich with onions or in a salad or sometimes just on a cracker for a snack. Try them!

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