



Omega 3 fats in pregnancy and breastfeeding

Information in this leaflet is general in nature and should not take the place of advice from your health care provider. With every pregnancy there is a 3 to 5% risk of having a baby with a birth defect.

What are Omega 3 fatty acids?

Omega 3 fatty acids are polyunsaturated fatty acids that are important for a healthy diet and normal development. They are not produced in our bodies and must be obtained from the food we eat.¹ Fatty fish such as sardines, anchovies, salmon, tuna and herring are a good source of omega 3 fats. They can also be found in lean meat and omega 3 enriched eggs. Vegetable sources include walnuts, linseed, soybeans, spinach and canola oil.¹

Omega 3 fats can also be obtained from oils and are available in supplement form. Fish oil is a concentrated and often purified form of omega 3 fat derived from fish². Flaxseed oil is a vegetable source of omega 3. It should be noted that flaxseed oil produces relatively smaller amounts of omega 3 fats compared to fish oils but can be used by vegetarians.³ Krill oil derived from krill, a type of crustacean, is a relatively unstudied source of omega 3.

Issues for pregnancy

Omega 3 fatty acids are considered to have **general** health benefits and in particular may protect against heart disease, stroke and arthritis.⁴ Some pregnant women try to increase their omega 3 fat intake because several well publicised studies have found associations with omega 3 fat intake and increased intelligence in children.⁵ Omega 3 fat has also been found to have been associated in **some studies** with reducing rates of prematurity and preeclampsia (a serious medical condition of pregnancy associated with high blood pressure). It may also increase birth weight. **However there are not enough studies of use in pregnancy to date, and overall, results are conflicting.**⁶

As a result, there are recommended intakes of fish to boost omega 3 but **supplementation** specifically with fish oil or flaxseed oil is not currently advocated.⁶ Nonetheless it is safe to take fish oil supplements **at recommended doses** during pregnancy and flaxseed oil is also safe in pregnancy.¹ Although krill oil is less likely to contain contaminants it is an unstudied product in pregnancy and is currently not recommended. Cod liver oil contains fish oil but because it also contains vitamin A it should be avoided in pregnancy.

In general, two to three serves of oily fish per week are recommended in pregnancy to provide recommended amounts of omega 3 fatty acids. This depends on the type of fish. For further information, please refer to the Food Authority NSW website:

<http://www.foodauthority.nsw.gov.au/foodsafetyandyou/life-events-and-food/pregnancy>

Although fish are a potential source of exposure to the toxin mercury, it is not considered a concern for pregnant women at this level of fish intake. Fish oil supplements in Australia are not a significant source of mercury.⁷



Breastfeeding

If you are breastfeeding, your baby will receive omega 3 fatty acids from your breast milk. The amount received depends on your own intake of omega 3 fats from fish or other sources. Two to three serves per week of most fish are safe while breastfeeding.⁷ It is also safe to supplement your diet with fish oil or flaxseed oil while breastfeeding.²

Many infant formulas also contain omega 3 fatty acids and they have particularly been shown to be beneficial in babies born prematurely.⁸

References

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