

Omega 3's, 6's and 9's Oh My!

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Anyone with even a basic day to day interest in what they're eating has certainly heard, whether from friends and family, gym members, even mainstream media outlets about the necessity of ensuring healthy fats in their daily diet. This isn't the goal just of the physique conscious masses, but also of anyone who desires to live a long, healthy and disease free life. So what are *healthy* fats? Aren't all fats the same? More importantly though, how can you fit the good ones into your lifestyle in a fairly easy manner and reap the benefits?

Firstly, let me briefly address the notion that dietary fats will not automatically create body fat. I've lamented the unfortunate situation that this one macronutrient is commonly called by the same term as human adipose tissue. As such, we see a negative stigma attached to the very term "fat" amongst the general populace. The incorrect position that the FDA formerly held, that a low fat diet is the be all end all for health and fitness, was a gross over simplification that appeared to revolve around the fact that a gram of fat will yield more usable energy (calories) than a gram of either carbohydrates or protein.

All dietary fats are made up of fatty acids (chains of carbon, hydrogen, and oxygen), and serve a variety of functions within the body. Some fats help in the absorption and utilization of certain necessary vitamins. Others promote brain development. Still others keep potentially harmful inflammation away and strengthen the immune system. These certainly don't sound like substances any intelligent person would want to eliminate from their diet!

Amongst dietary fats, we typically think of the saturated and unsaturated variety (polyunsaturated and monounsaturated). While the difference is one that exists on the chemical level, to the eye, you will notice that the saturated fats typically have a solid consistency at room temperature while the unsaturated fats are typically liquid at room temperature.

Sources of saturated fats include animal meats, Dairy products, certain plant oils (kernel and coconut), and of course process meats and prepackaged snacks. While not all saturated fat is "bad" per say, the general guidelines offered by the FDA and most well educated professionals tend to recommend a much smaller percentage of daily fat intake come from this category.

Sources of unsaturated fats include nuts, plant oils (vegetable, canola), certain fish (salmon), avocados, and olives. It is this category of fats that gets all of the attention in the media, and with good cause. The studies relating to heart health, cholesterol, and a whole host of benefits are vast. It is within this category of unsaturated fats that we find a few different varieties. Omega 3's, 6's, and 9's are all unsaturated fats. The difference, at least on a chemical level, is where they have a double bond in their structure. This seemingly minute detail can greatly affect their properties and how they can influence our health.

Omega 3's seem to be the darling of the popular media these days, and with good reason. A major effect of its inclusion in a sound diet is the suppression of inflammation. As so many diseases humans battle on a daily basis stem from an inflammatory response, you can see why everyone from doctors to gym rats are repeating the recommendations. The small stumbling block though, is that the body cannot make the most essential Omega 3 fatty acid, Alpha-Linolenic Acid (ALA). Even if we plan

and obtain ALA via intelligent diet, the conversion of ALA to EPA and DHA (which possess the anti-inflammatory benefits we mentioned!) is not the most efficient. As such, you will see many people touting supplementation of EPA and DHA instead of ALA, the “parent” molecule in pursuit of its possible benefits.

Omega 6’s get a bad rap most of the time. The primary Omega 6 (linoleic acid) will convert, and then serve as a precursor to molecules that can increase inflammation as well as increase duration and intensity of pain. Obviously who would desire such a thing? Still, the average U.S. diet has quite an abundance of 6’s, which might possibly explain our current medical climate.

Omega 9’s are found in animal fats, olives, and even nuts and seeds. Unlike 3’s and 6’s they are non-essential. This means that as the body can create its own, dietary supplementation is not normally necessary.

So how do we put all of this to use? Well, the real take home is the ratio of 6’s to 3’s. As Omega 3’s can work in an anti-inflammatory manner, and 6’s work in a pro-inflammatory manner, you can see how you can affect certain metabolic situations with the EFA’s (essential fatty acids) with your day to day food choices. Most top researchers these days recommend a one to one, or two to one ratio of 6’s to 3’s. The primary emphasis being that because the average American diet already includes plenty of 6’s, more people need to make a conscious effort to include 3’s. Still, it’s never always black and white, and there is still some discussion back and forth on details. Experts on all sides are in agreement with one thing though, most people need to get more omega 3 fats in their diet. The benefits certainly make this something everyone should look into!