

ESSENTIAL FATTY ACIDS FACTSHEET

Fats are necessary for normal brain development, the eyes and the nervous system and needed to provide energy and maintain growth. Problems occur when we consume more saturated fat than our bodies can use and when we eat too little of the good fats - as has happened over the past century. Our intake of saturated fats and hydrogenated vegetable oils has dramatically increased, whereas our intake of essential fats has decreased.

Unlike saturated fats, we humans cannot manufacture our own essential fatty acids (EFA's) and are entirely dependent on dietary sources. There are two groups of EFAs we need to eat, one called omega 6 and the other omega 3. For optimal health, it is important to obtain enough of both oils in the right proportions. The ratios vary from person to person but experts recommend two parts of omega 3 to one part omega 6.

The omega 6s are found in nuts, seeds and most vegetable oils. Higher sources are contained in evening primrose, starflower, blackcurrant, sesame oils, walnuts, brazil nuts, pecans, almonds, pumpkin and sunflower seeds.

The richest source of omega 3s comes from cold-water fish and flaxseed (also called linseeds). Small amounts are present in walnuts, wheat germ and soya oils. Another source is phytoplankton and algae which are tiny plants that live in oceans and lakes. Researchers are concerned that our modern diet is particularly lacking in the omega 3 oils. A deficiency of these oils has been implicated in heart disease, cancer and immune dysfunction as well as possibly affecting brain development and IQ in children.

For vegans, those worried about polluted or farmed fish, or those that are simply allergic to fish, flaxseed is a welcome alternative source, as is hempseed. The tiny flaxseeds are golden or brown in colour with a pleasant, nutty flavour. They can be ground in a coffee grinder (use 1 tablespoon per day) and sprinkled over breakfast cereal, porridge or even mixed into a glass of water. Flaxseeds aid digestion and are believed to counter inflammatory reactions associated with arthritis and other conditions. It is important to be aware that some people are genetically unable to convert the beneficial oils in flax for use in the body and require fish or algae in their diets.

To work effectively, EFAs need nutrients such as the vitamins B6, A, C, E and the minerals magnesium, zinc, copper and selenium. If even one of these nutrients is deficient, it can have a similar effect as an EFA deficiency. Mother Nature is clever, presenting essential fatty acid rich foods together with co-factor nutrients. Fatty acid rich nuts, seeds and beans are good sources of minerals as well as the vitamins E and B6. Fish contains plenty of minerals, as does seaweed – which is why a vast majority of the world's population relies on marine life for sustenance. Add vegetables and you have an immune-building diet humanity has thrived on for thousands of years.

Essential oils should never be heated as they are volatile and spoil quickly when exposed to heat, light or oxygen. Oil that tastes bitter or rancid should be discarded. In order absorb and utilise essential fats, decrease intake of processed foods containing bad fats. Bad fats are those that have been refined, deodorised, heated, fried, hydrogenated or partially hydrogenated. Eat plenty of nuts and seeds with some fruit for a quick energising snack.