



Omega-3 madness

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Are omega-3s the latest mega-trend?

At first, claims showed up largely on egg cartons. Now you can find them on everything from margarine to mayonnaise, milk, bread, cereal, salad dressing, juice, soy milk, yogurt, waffles, cookies, frozen pizza, pasta and (of course) canned fish.

But not all omega-3s are created equal. It's largely DHA and EPA, the long-chain omega-3 fats in fish oil, that are linked to a lower risk of heart disease, cancer, Alzheimer's disease, eye disorders and other health problems.

Yet many claims appear on foods that have ALA (alpha-linolenic acid), a shorter chain omega-3 fat that may not prevent much of anything (and may raise the risk of prostate cancer). And many labels don't bother to say which omega-3 their food contains.

Here's a sampling of tricks that can trip you up in the search for omega-3s at your grocery store.

SLICK SILK

Silk Plus Omega-3 DHA Fortified Soy Beverage has added algae (algal oil, to be precise), which contains DHA. So Silk qualifies to make a claim for DHA's "biological role" in the body. "DHA, an omega-3 fatty acid, supports the normal development of the brain, eyes and nerves," declares the label.

A biological role claim can't imply that a food can treat or prevent any disease, disorder or abnormal physical state, according to Health Canada. So don't assume that DHA will work wonders for your memory, vision or nervous system.

Biological role aside, Silk's label is still sneaky. Each cup has 0.4 grams of omega-3s, says the Nutrition Facts panel. That sounds like it has 0.4 grams of DHA. Not so fast.

Only a few dedicated label readers will notice that Silk Plus also has flax oil, which contains ALA, the far-less-useful omega-3. And fewer may catch the tiny type at the bottom of the carton that says "0.03 grams of DHA per 250-mL serving."

But at least Silk Plus has some, DHA. In contrast, other soy milks -- like So Good Omega ("made with

flax") and Sensational Soy (a "source of omega-3" that's "made with natural and organic soybeans") -- have none.

EGGSAGGERATION

Omega-3 claims are all over the egg case.

Perhaps producers are trying to counter the egg's reputation as a heart threat by adding flax to their hen's feed.

Read your cartons carefully. Some eggs -- like Naturegg or President's Choice Blue Menu Omega-3 (0.075 grams of DHA per egg), Gray Ridge Omega 3 (0.085 grams), and Naturegg Omega Pro or Gray Ridge Omega Choice (0.125 grams) -- put their DHA numbers on the package. But Compliments Balance's carton ("source of omega-3 polyunsaturated fat") doesn't mention DHA. (Each egg has 0.075 grams -- about four times more than an ordinary egg.)

CARDIO CLAIMS

The yogurt aisle is starting to look like the exhibits at a cardiologists' convention. With brands like Yoplait Source Cardio Omega 3 and Astro BioBest Omega 3 CardioPro+, it sounds like the next stir-ins will be a choice of Lipitor or low-dose Aspirin.

Neither yogurt has DHA or EPA, just enough flax oil to supply each 100-gram serving with 0.3 grams of omega-3s. In contrast, the same size serving of Danone Danino Go Danimals, a drinkable yogurt for kids, has 0.02 grams of DHA from fish oil. Danone used to sell a yogurt with fish oil (Cardivia) for adults, but it flopped. Maybe fish oil -- even if it's colourless and tasteless -- doesn't sell well in yogurt ... unless it's aimed at parents who want DHA to boost their youngsters' brains.

OH MEGA MEDAL

Thank you, President's Choice. The company deserves a blue ribbon for the label on its Blue Menu Oh Mega j Orange Juice. Large, readable print (what a concept!) on the front of the carton says "0.05 g omega-3 DHA and EPA per 1 cup." And the label makes clear that Oh Mega j is "orange juice with encapsulated fish oil." Clear as a bell.

In contrast, PC's competitors are more like puzzles.

Tropicana Essentials Omega-3 Orange Juice (also with fish oil) has "0.1 g OMEGA-3 polyunsaturates per 250 mL" plastered across the label. Only the smaller print on a side panel owns up to the modest "0.02 g of DHA per serving."

Minute Maid Fruit Solutions Omega-3 Mango Orange Passion Juice Blend boasts "Omega-3 0.1 g per 250 mL" on the front. Again, only a side panel notes (in parentheses) that you're getting just 0.02 grams of DHA. Encapsulated fish oil is mentioned only in the list of about 20 ingredients.

And Lassoncle's refrigerated Oasis Health Break Strawberry and Kiwi Fruit Juice with Omega-3 has no

numbers other than the 0.3 grams of omega-3 listed in the Nutrition Facts panel (which makes it look like a richer source than the other three juices, which list only 0.1 grams of omega-3). So shoppers have to know that when the front label says "a delicious fruit juice cocktail with flaxseed oil," that means ALA, but no DHA or EPA.

Here's a time-saving tip for Health Canada: Require other labels to be as clear and easy-to-read as PC's. Find-the-DHA-numbers can be entertaining, but some of us have better things to do.

MILKING OMEGAS

Neilson Dairy Oh! 1% Milk with DHA 11 comes from cows fed a unique diet containing the omega-3 fatty acid, DHA. According to the label, "No other milk can say that!"

On the other hand, Natrel Omega-3 1% Milk Beverage, adorned with a shapely red heart, boasts that "a healthy diet low in saturated and trans fats may reduce the risk of heart disease." And Beatrice Omega-3 1% CardioPro Milk Beverage is "the milk with heart!"

Remember when milk was either homogenized, skim or chocolate?

Natrel's and Beatrice's claims may sound impressive, but they could go on any 1% or skim milk. The dairies add enough flaxseed oil (about 1/8 teaspoon per cup) to supply 0.3 grams of ALA. (The added oil explains why they're "milk beverages," not simply "milk.") But the evidence that ALA prevents heart disease isn't strong enough to justify any claims.

As for Neilson, we paid 70 cents more for a two-litre carton of Dairy Oh! (available only in Ontario) than for Neilson's regular one-per-cent milk. And each cup contains just 0.01 grams of DHA, according to the carton's small print.

À LA CARTE BLANCHE?

"Source of Omega-3," say the labels of Hellmann's Cholesterol Free Mayonnaise and Lactantia Healthy Attitude Omega 3 margarine. Since when did mayo and margarine have omega-3s?

They always have. Both are largely canola oil, which packs 1.3 grams of ALA per tablespoon. (Soybean oil has 0.9 grams, while flaxseed oil has 7.3 grams.)

Likewise, canola oil is largely responsible for the omega-3 claims on foods like President's Choice Blue Menu Raspberry Coffee Cake, PC Blue Menu Thick & Juicy Roasted Vegetable Chicken Burgers, Schneiders Oh Nature! Meatless Breaded Chick'n Nuggets, and Compliments Beef Burgers.

Even foods with fish oil often have a far bigger dose of ALA than DHA or EPA. In Becel's new Omega3plus, for example, the 0.05 grams of DHA plus EPA (in two teaspoons) comes along with 0.55 grams of ALA from the spread's canola and sunflower oils.

The question is: Do you want more ALA? Like other unsaturated fats, it helps lower blood cholesterol.

But experts disagree over whether it reduces the risk of heart disease. And some studies have found that men who eat an average of 1.5 grams a day of ALA have twice the risk of advanced prostate cancer of men who average 0.7 grams a day.

BOTTOM LINE

If you want the (potential) benefits of omega-3s, go for DHA and EPA. And until experts clarify the possible link with prostate cancer, men shouldn't go out of their way to get more ALA. Women needn't worry about getting too much. And it's tough to get too little ALA, what with all the soybean and canola oil in the food supply.

Information compiled by Tina Babouchian in Toronto.

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THE BASICS ON OMEGA-3S

Although we refer to them as fats, technically omega-3 fatty acids are acid molecules found in natural fats and oils. There are three kinds of omega-3 fatty acids:

DHA and EPA: Found especially in fatty fish like salmon and trout. Referred to as "long-chain" fatty acids because of their molecular makeup. Studies have shown them to be effective in improving cardiovascular health, and possibly a host of other ailments. These are the omega-3s you want.

ALA: Found chiefly in flaxseed oil, as well as canola and soybean oils. Studies have shown its health benefits to be not as promising as those of EPA and DHA, and a few studies found that men who eat more than 1.5 grams of ALA have a higher risk of advanced prostate cancer.

Some countries recommend eating about 0.5 grams of DHA and EPA a day. Health Canada recommends eating fatty fish twice a week, which works out to about 0.5 grams of DHA and EPA a day.

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