ADHD Treatment: Are Fish Oil Supplements Worth the Hype?

by ALEXANDER BEIGA

Fish Oil and ADHD

When it comes to fish oil supplements, everything isn't as it seems.

The companies who manufacture fish oil supplements make big claims about their health benefits. But the research they use to back those claims is not high quality.

Medicine is based on facts, not loosely-based claims. Here's a fact for you: the majority of fish oil supplements have not proven effective using double-blind placebo studies.

Instead, they were proven effective using simpler, less "controlled" studies. As a result, their data was most likely corrupted by participant bias or researcher sabotage.

Double-blind placebo studies are the foundation of modern evidence-based medicine. Learn more about the importance of double-blind placebo studies.

Continue reading to develop a solid understanding of fish oil supplements that you can use to inform your decisions.

What Are Fish Oil Supplements?

They are supplements filled with omega 3 fatty acids, called omega 3s, extracted from fish.

When there are low levels of omega 3s in your body, you might experience a variety of cognitive and mood problems.

Unfortunately, there's only two ways we can get significant amounts of omega 3s. Either by eating fish and plants, or by taking supplements.

There are three types of omega 3s and all are hard to pronounce. (Feel free to go by the abbreviations.)

- ALA (alpha-linolenic acid). Found in vegetable oil and plants like flax.
- DHA (docosahexaenoic acid). Found in tuna, salmon, shrimp, and other fish.
- EPA (eicosapentaenoic acid). Found in tuna, salmon, shrimp, and other fish.

DHA and EPA are the preferred omega 3s. ALA is best for people who are allergic to fish or disgusted by the taste of fish oil supplements.

What We Know So Far About Fish Oil Supplements

Fish oil supplements are not an FDA-approved treatment for ADHD. There is mixed evidence for its effectiveness on ADHD.

Some researchers claim fish oil can improve ADHD symptoms, while others disagree. However, everyone agrees more research is needed, especially research using double-blind placebo studies.

For the mean time, there are a limited number of facts regarding fish oil supplements that you can use to inform your decisions.

Facts:

- FDA-approved ADHD medication is many times more effective than a supplement.
- It can take up to three months for fish oil supplements to impact ADHD symptoms.
- It's true that omega 3s are necessary for overall health, however, taking too many might be risky. The same applies to vitamins and minerals.
- According to a Harvard study, fish oil supplements likely won't benefit people who eat at least 1.5 servings of fish per week.
- Omega 3s are essential for heart health. (Heart problems are the number one cause of death in America.)
- 86% of Americans take some kind of supplement, yet only 21% are confirmed to need supplements.

Don't Buy Fish Oil Supplements Over-the-Counter, Get a Prescription

Yes, it's true you don't need a prescription to get over-the-counter fish oil and other forms of omega 3s. You can get them from almost any pharmacy or grocery story.

However, over-the-counter fish oil supplements are not held to the highest FDA standards and come with risks. Because of this, many of them can be unsafe, make misleading claims and have less omega 3s in them than what they claim.

You don't have to worry about those risks when you take prescription fish oil supplements or any other prescription omega 3 supplement.

Prescription omega 3s have to follow the FDA's strict rules about dosage, safety and quality.

Concerning children, it's always best to talk to a doctor before giving your child omega 3 supplements like fish oil. A doctor can explain potential side effects like blood thinning and upset stomach, that could endanger you or your child.

Your doctor can tell you whether you need omega 3 supplements, and also tell you what dosage you need. Dosage amounts are based on medications you already take, your weight and other health issues you may have.

Side Effects and Risks

The side effects of fish oil supplements are unique compared to ADHD medication.

List of common fish oil side effects:

- Bad breath
- Nausea
- Indigestion/stomach pain
- Fish burps

Fish burps deserve a special mention because the only way to get them is from taking fish oil supplements.

The reason fish burps occur is low stomach acid. Without enough stomach acid, the fish oil supplement dissolves

too early in your stomach.

Fish oil supplements should dissolve in your small intestine. If they dissolve before reaching that point, you get fish burps.

To avoid fish burps, it’s recommended you use liquid supplements, or freeze the supplements before use.

List of uncommon fish oil side effects:

- Skin rash
- Back pain
- Heart burn
- Flu-like symptoms
- Minor infection

Allergies and Mercury Concerns

If you are allergic to fish or shellfish, speak with your doctor to learn if you can take fish oil supplements safely.

For certain individuals such as pregnant women and young children, high amounts of mercury can be lethal. If you’re a woman and plan on becoming pregnant, mercury can stay in your blood stream for over a year after you’ve quit eating fish.

Check the label to see if it is marked “mercury-free” or “refined to eliminate mercury”. On the bright side, fish and fish oil supplements are safer when taken as prescribed by a doctor.

If you’re considering taking fish oil supplements or giving them to your child, be sure to talk to a doctor about it first.