

Fish vs. Fish Oil Supplements: Which is Better for a Healthy Pregnancy?



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Omega-3 fatty acids boost brain development in fetuses and babies. They are widely considered healthy and safe for women who are pregnant, nursing or planning to become pregnant. But which is the better source of omega-3s: fish or fish oil supplements?

On the whole, eating fish is the ideal way to consume healthy fatty acids. Studies suggest that eating the real thing gives women more consistent health benefits than taking fish oil supplements, because fish contains additional nutrients. Most species are good sources of lean protein, iodine, vitamin D, selenium and more. That's why doctors and the Food and Drug Administration recommend that women eat 8-to-12 ounces of seafood a week.

But there's a catch: Some species of fish and shellfish contain high levels of mercury, which inhibits brain development. A [new report](#) from EWG shows that following the FDA guidelines may actually harm fetuses and babies by exposing them to too much mercury and not enough omega-3s. [Learn more about the study.](#)

EWG recommends that women who are pregnant or nursing aim for one or two four-ounce servings each week of fish that is high in omega-3s and low in mercury. "Best bets" include wild salmon, sardines, mussels, rainbow trout and Atlantic mackerel. [Click here for EWG's comprehensive recommendations about fish to eat or avoid while pregnant.](#)

Many pregnant or nursing women, however, choose not to eat seafood, or don't eat enough to meet their

nutritional needs. Some worry about mercury, other contaminants and sustainability. Others don't like the taste, follow a vegetarian diet or have a hard time finding or affording good seafood in their region. For these individuals, fish oil supplements are an excellent alternative. (Note: [Prenatal multivitamins](#) typically do not contain omega-3s.)

The two omega-3s found in fish and fish oil supplements are DHA (docosahexaenoic acid) and EPA (eicosapentaenoic acid). Federal dietary guidelines recommend that women get an average of 250 milligrams per day.

While fish eaters can get the recommended amount of omega-3s from diet alone, vegetarians and non-fish-eaters need supplements. Nuts and vegetables, including canola oil, soybean oil, flax seeds, chia seeds and walnuts contain a third omega-3 fatty acid known as ALA (alpha-linolenic acid), but this is a less effective source of essential fatty acids during pregnancy.

Important note for moms: Although fish oil supplements are a healthy choice during pregnancy, fish *liver* oil supplements, such as cod liver oil, are *not*. These oils contain a lot of vitamin A, which can cause birth defects when taken in excess during pregnancy. [Click here to learn more about how excess vitamin A can harm children's health.](#)

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