

Omega-3 fatty acids helpful for depression

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QUESTION: You mentioned in a prior column that fish oils could help with depression. I can't verify that with my doctor, and I take high doses of Wellbutrin. What do you recommend? — R.V., Lawrenceburg, Tenn.

ANSWER: It's no secret. Research studies point to lots of benefits from omega-3 fish oils. In 1998, a *Lancet* study compared statistics regarding depression with fish consumption and found that populations consuming higher amounts of cold-water seafood experienced less depression. In 2003, the *American Journal of Psychiatry* found a strong correlation for better health when comparing statistics on bipolar disorder and fish consumption.

But this news isn't widespread because fish oils are usually celebrated for lowering cholesterol and protecting the heart. With depression, people have reduced

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levels of a fatty acid, EPA (for eicosapentaenoic acid), which is essential for good health. EPA is one of the primary ingredients in fish oils. The other is DHA, also an impressive, healthful substance.

Taking fish oils gives your brain (and body) a good amount of both of these vital nutrients, often referred to as omega-3 fatty acids. By consuming more omega-3s, you can reduce your risk for many neurological disorders, including Alzheimer's. These important nutrients are also found in flaxseed, pumpkin seed and walnuts.

With depression, omega-3 fatty acids play a few important roles. For one thing, fish oils, being "fatty," make the outside walls of our cells healthier and more "slippery." When our brain cells are nourished and the cell membranes are healthy, they transmit impulses more efficiently. Production for happy brain chemicals is increased. Everything starts to flow freely between cells and there is a cascade of positive effects. Omega-3s are also powerful anti-inflammatories and, incidentally, help arthritic sufferers.

In 2002, the Townsend Letter reported the case of a 21-year-old man with a seven-year history of depres-

sion, who was taking the drug paroxetine (Paxil) with no relief. He began taking 4,000 mg of EPA daily along with his regular daily dose of paroxetine and his symptoms dramatically improved.

In a recent study, over two-thirds of the participants reported benefit with 1,000 mg of fish oil taken daily. These participants reported a 50 percent reduction in symptoms, compared to those on placebo, who experienced a 25 percent improvement.

Besides depression, omega-3 fatty acids are useful for such disorders as bipolar, Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, fibromyalgia, chronic fatigue, MS, high cholesterol, high blood pressure, joint pain, bowel problems and heart disease.

Because omega-3s tend to become unstable in the body, always take a little vitamin C or vitamin E along with your dose and take fish oils with food.

DID YOU KNOW? Meridia, for weight loss, is under fire because it can seriously increase your blood pressure and heart rate. There are also reports of stroke and heart attack, though obese patients are at higher risk for these anyway. Never take more than prescribed.

This information is not intended to treat, cure or diagnose your condition. Suzy Cohen is a registered pharmacist. To contact her, visit www.dearpharmacist.com.

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