Fact Sheet: Omega-3 Fatty Acids

What are they? Omega-3 fatty acids are polyunsaturated fats. There are different classes of fatty acids, depending on their chemical structure, and omega-3 fatty acids are one class.

What do they do? The omega-3 fatty acids have numerous beneficial effects on the body, primarily related to cardiovascular health.

Why are they important? Our typical diet contains too many omega-6 fatty acids - another class of fatty acids which are converted into inflammatory agents that are bad for our health. Omega-3 fatty acids help to balance out our intake of the omega-6 fats.

Where are they found? The richest source of omega-3 fatty acids is fish oil. When you eat fish, much of the fat is healthy omega-3 fat. Fattier fish like wild salmon, herring, mackerel, and sardines are particularly good sources. Farmed fish often have less omega-3 fatty acid content (and more omega-6 fatty acids) because they are fed a diet much different from what wild fish consume.

There are also small amounts of omega-3 fats in certain plant products, like flaxseed and some leafy green vegetables like spinach. Also, many products – from cereals to yogurt – have omega-3 fatty acids added to them. The omega-3 fatty acids in vegetables and flaxseed are not exactly the same as those found in fish, and the body cannot use these plant-derived acids as effectively as fish-derived fatty acids. Because most people don’t eat very much fish, they can address this nutritional need by responsible supplementation of their diet.