

ONE SMALL CHANGE
**EAT MORE
OMEGA 3s**

Our bodies can't produce these essential fatty acids on their own, so we need to get them from our diet. Happily, these everyday foods will boost your intake – a win-win for your health and taste buds

Words Anita Bean



Spinach has 110mg omega 3 in 80g, and is high in vitamins C, A and folate – all great for the immune system

Avocados have 89mg omega 3 per 80g, plus monounsaturated fats to help maintain healthy blood cholesterol



Linseeds/flaxseeds

contain a whopping 6840mg omega 3 in 30g, along with soluble and insoluble fibre



NUTRITION INFORMATION ALICE HART

OMEGA 3s: THE BASICS

Omega 3 is a family of fats (or fatty acids) that are essential for health. There are three types: alpha-linolenic acid (ALA), eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA) and docosahexaenoic acid (DHA). ALA, the most common omega 3 fatty acid in the diet, is mainly found in oils from plant foods, such as nuts and seeds. It's naturally converted into the biologically active forms of omega 3 (EPA and

DHA) in the body – albeit in small amounts.

EPA and DHA come from oily fish, such as mackerel and salmon, and certain types of algae. White fish and shellfish contain small amounts, but only one-tenth of the amount in oily fish. There is also an increasing range of omega 3-fortified foods, including eggs (achieved by feeding hens omega 3-enriched feed), bread and spreads.

Omega 3s have a reputation akin to star status in the nutritional world. But what are they, and what makes these nutrients a vital component in our diets? “Omega 3s are like the vitamins of the fat world,” explains Dr Linia Patel, a registered dietitian and spokesperson for the British Dietetic Association. “That’s because, like vitamins, they are essential for our health. Our bodies cannot make them in sufficient amounts, so we need to get them from what we eat.”

Omega 3s perform several important functions. “They are a vital component of the brain and eyes, and help keep your heart, lungs, blood vessels and immune system working properly. They also help to fight inflammation – thought to be an underlying cause of many chronic diseases, including heart disease – as well as the decline in brain function that occurs as we get older,” says Linia.

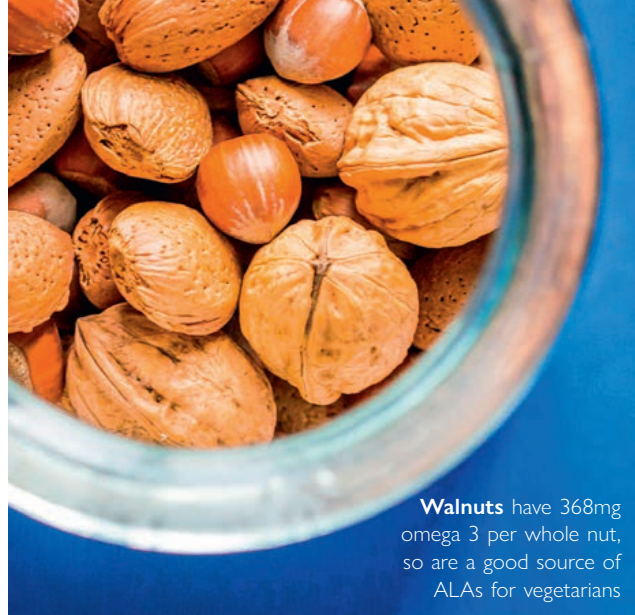
Diets rich in omega 3s have been linked to a lower risk of heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes, certain cancers,

Alzheimer’s, arthritis, dementia and depression. In countries with high fish consumption, people tend to have a lower risk of heart disease compared to people from countries where less fish is eaten, including the UK. Because of this link and other nutritional benefits, the NHS recommends eating at least two portions of fish each week, with one of these portions being an oily variety.

Oily fish include herring, mackerel, pilchards, salmon, sardines and trout. (Fresh and canned tuna do not count as oily fish.) A portion of fish is around 140g cooked, or 170g uncooked – around a tin and a half of sardines or an average-sized chunk of salmon fillet. To ensure there are enough fish to eat now and in the future, try to buy fish »

‘THE BEST WAY TO GET YOUR OMEGA 3s IS FROM YOUR DIET’

PHOTOGRAPHS ALAMY, SARA MORRIS



Walnuts have 368mg omega 3 per whole nut, so are a good source of ALAs for vegetarians

'DIETS RICH IN OMEGA 3s HAVE BEEN LINKED WITH A LOWER RISK OF DISEASE'

from sustainable sources. The most sustainable species include Cornish hake, handline-caught mackerel, Dover sole, red mullet, red gurnard, mussels, oysters, scallops and clams. All Waitrose own-brand fish, from the counter to pre-packed, frozen or tinned, is sustainably sourced.

Increasing your intake of the three types of omega 3s (see The Basics on previous page) is trickier if you follow a plant-based diet or if you don't frequently eat oily fish. Your best option is to include sources of alpha-linolenic acid (ALA) in your diet – found in walnuts, ground linseed, hemp, chia and pumpkin seeds – and to use rapeseed oil as your main cooking oil. Dark green leafy vegetables (such as spinach and kale) also contain small amounts.

You can meet the 'adequate intake' of ALA recommended by the European Food Safety Authority from one tablespoon of chia seeds or ground linseed (also known as flaxseed); two tablespoons of hemp seeds; or six walnut halves. To get more in your diet, sprinkle ground linseed on porridge or bake into bread and muffins; add chia seeds to smoothies, porridge, or try chia seed pudding; snack on walnuts or use as a topping for salads or porridge; and switch to rapeseed oil for cooking. Vegan supplements made from microalgae oil are widely available and provide an easy way of boosting your EPA and DHA.

Surprisingly, recent research has shown that omega 3 supplements, commonly taken to boost intake, may not be as effective in protecting against heart disease as the essential fatty acids from food sources. A series of studies conducted in 2018 (involving 112,059 people) found that taking omega 3 supplements may have little or no effect on the risk of heart disease, stroke or early death. Although diet has been shown to play a role in the prevention of heart disease, it is unlikely that a single nutrient is responsible for this. Because of this, omega 3 supplements are not generally recommended to the UK population.

GO MEGA FOR OMEGA 3s

Looking for easy ways to boost your intake? Here are five quick wins – from seaweed snacks to seedy sprinkles...

1 Vegans will benefit from stirring chia seeds, linseeds (flaxseeds), walnuts or hemp seeds into their porridge, overnight oats, breakfast cereals or even salads. Try scattering cold-milled flaxseeds, with or without other seeds or nuts, over foods for a particularly convenient fatty-acid hit.



2 Wilt shredded kale or cavolo nero leaves, which are a good source of

omega 3s, into braises, stews and soups. Finish with a drizzle of extra virgin olive oil, which will add further omega 3 fatty acids.

3 Seafood lovers, rejoice: trout, salmon, mackerel and crab are just some of the excellent fish and seafood sources, while mussels make a good budget choice. Stir cooked mussels into a garlic and tomato pasta sauce, then

fold through cooked spaghetti along with a drizzle of olive oil, plenty of chopped parsley and a scattering of chopped fresh chillies.



4 Kidney and edamame beans are a surprisingly good source of omega 3s

(in the form of ALAs). Add the former to vegetable-rich chillies and soups, and the latter to stir fries and noodle salads, keeping them vegan or vegetarian as needed.

5 Oily fish provides the best source of omega 3 fatty acids EPA and DHA, but for vegans, seaweeds or algae such as spirulina can be useful for increasing your intake. Stir spirulina powder into vegetable and fruit juices, snip nori seaweed sheets into salads and use to wrap sushi rice and vegetables, or eat crispy seaweed thins as a snack with spiced nuts and steamed edamame pods.

Find a wealth of oily and white fish dishes at [waitrose.com/recipes](https://www.waitrose.com/recipes)

There are some instances in which you may be advised to take omega 3 supplements. If you are, opt for those with low levels of vitamin A (too much vitamin A can be harmful to certain groups). If you are pregnant or breastfeeding, avoid supplements that contain vitamin A entirely. "The best way to get your omega 3s is from your diet," confirms Linia. "That's because foods contain a whole range of different nutrients, which improve your health in different ways."

Health writer Anita Bean is a registered nutritionist specialising in sports nutrition. She has worked with the British Olympic Association and Swim England, and has written numerous books on health and diet.