

Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

"Will Fish Oil Enhance Weight Loss?"

We have been told that fish oil (omega-3 fatty acids) improves cardiovascular health and prior evidence from animal studies have shown that omega-3 fatty acids promote weight loss. Because fish oil possibly has many other potential health benefits, including cutting cholesterol, improving insulin sensitivity, and reducing blood pressure, "weight-loss programs associated with the use of omega-3 polyunsaturated fatty acids seemed appropriate to the investigators." Investigators randomly assigned 128 sedentary overweight or obese men and women to take five fish oil capsules (providing a total of three grams of omega-3 fatty acids) or five placebo capsules every day for 24 weeks to determine their effects in humans. This was combined with a diet and exercise regime. Participants also performed 150 minutes a week of aerobic exercise and 20 to 30 minutes of strength exercises at least twice a week. Participants in both the fish oil and placebo groups lost more than five percent of their body weight, which was enough to produce health benefits. However, according to an online December 15, 2010 article, in the American Journal of Clinical Nutrition, fish oil capsules will not help boost weight loss if you are already dieting and exercising. Among the group of overweight and obese adults enrolled in this diet and exercise study, those who took omega-3 fatty acids did not lose any more weight than those given placebo pills. Surprisingly, at the end of the study, there was no difference between the groups in measures of heart disease risk, such as blood pressure and cholesterol levels, even though omega-3 blood levels in the fish oil group increased to a level "previously found to have a positive cardiovascular effect." Also, a new \$10 million dollar study recently showed that omega-3 pills, promoted as memory booster, did not slow mental and physical decline in older patients with Alzheimer's disease. In recent years, omega-3 has been added to or "fortified" in foods such as margarine, and eggs or labeled to highlight the omega-3 content of foods like tuna fish in efforts to capitalize on the current fish oil craze.

In the America that I love, we will always try to get the facts before jumping on the band wagon, in response to exuberant announcements by those peddling the dietary supplements. We have to separate fact from factitious. Otherwise, we may well be wasting our hard earned money and reacting to false claims. We have to remember that these supplements are frequently not checked for purity, strength or contaminants and the FDA does not check any of them for safety or effectiveness. They are classified as "food" and not as drugs, even though they make wild medicinal-sounding claims. Please do not be misled by flashy headlines.

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