

Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

By Randolph M. Howes, M.D., Ph.D.

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“World Fish Demand is Unsustainable”

The United Nations just warned that a third of the world's oceans are overfished and fish consumption is at an all-time high, raising fears over the sustainability of a key source of protein for millions around the world. Overfishing is particularly bad in parts of the developing world where many people already struggle to get enough nutritious food to eat. Currently, 3.2 billion people rely on fish for almost 20% of their animal protein intake. Fish is one small part of a healthy diet. People who eat at least two servings a week of oily fish like salmon, mackerel, herring, and tuna should keep it up because US doctors still say it's a good way to reduce the risk of heart attack and stroke. But, this is not a prescription for fried catfish. The new scientific advisory reaffirms the American Heart Association (AHA) recommendations against fried fish and stresses the benefits of eating two 3.5-ounce servings a week of fish, especially oily varieties rich in omega-3 fatty acids. Some medical articles say that it is possible that eating at least two weekly servings of fish—especially those with lots of omega-3 fatty acids—can help lower the risk of heart failure, coronary heart disease, cardiac arrest, and ischemic stroke. To the contrary, the European Society of Cardiology has called a protective effect of omega-3s “debatable at best.” Further, new research reveals that males with high blood concentrations of omega-3 fatty acids are at a much higher risk of developing prostate cancer. Also, the AHA recommends shrimp, light canned tuna, salmon, pollock and catfish as being low in mercury. Currently, there is too much pressure on marine resources and it is predicted that Africa will have to import fish in the near future. As catches from the open sea continue to dwindle, more countries are turning to fish farms. In Algeria, the government is encouraging farmers in the Sahara Desert to grow fish (fish farming or aquaculture) to increase their income and boost fish production. Aquaculture is the fastest growing agricultural sector for the past 40 years and has been largely responsible for making more fish available. Curiously, omega-3 fatty acids have gotten a heart-healthy reputation without good evidence that they actually prevent major cardiovascular disease events. And, they may inadvertently increase bleeding tendencies. Please check out my book, *“Fish oils (omega-3 fatty acids): Facts, Fantasies and Failures”* available at amazon.com.

In the America that I love, people should get their omega-3 fatty acids and fish oil from actually eating fish rather than through supplements. Benefits of fish oil are highly debated but eating fish is both nutritious and healthy. We should openly encourage aquaculture to bolster our fish supply worldwide.

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