

Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

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

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“Something Is Fishy About Fish Oils”

Television, radio and printed advertising is saturated with convincing complimentary ads for fish oil supplementation, but scientific studies are showing either no beneficial effects or they show a downside. Advertisers have claimed for years that fish oil (omega-3) improves heart health because they allegedly increase "good" HDL cholesterol. When scientifically tested, fish oil supplements (omega-3, PUFA) does not live up to the exalted claims of advertisers. Currently, fish oil supplements are indicated for patients with elevated plasma triglycerides to reduce cardiovascular risk. According to a new study, omega-3 supplements are associated with an increased likelihood of developing atrial fibrillation in people with high blood lipids. Some clinical trials have suggested that omega-3 fatty acids may be associated with an increased risk for atrial fibrillation, the most common heart rhythm disorder. People with the disorder have a five times greater likelihood of having a stroke. The American Heart Association (AHA) has recommended use as “reasonable” for secondary prevention of coronary heart disease in patients with recent events and "might also be considered" in people with heart failure and reduced ejection fraction. To the contrary, the European Society of Cardiology has called a protective effect of omega-3s “debatable at best.” There is agreement that people should get their omega-3 fatty acids and fish oil from food rather than through supplements. Low dose omega-3 fatty acids are available over the counter, without the need for a prescription. Also, due to the high prevalence of elevated triglycerides in the population, they are commonly prescribed. Consumers should remember that taking fish oils, fish liver oils, and omega 3 supplements may pose a risk for some people. Omega-3 supplements may affect blood clotting and trigger gastrointestinal problems. Also, consuming high levels of oily fish increases the ingestion of high levels of toxic mercury. The AHA recommend shrimp, light canned tuna, salmon, pollock and catfish as being low in mercury. They advise avoiding shark, swordfish, king mackerel, and tilefish, as these can be high in mercury. New research reveals that males with high blood concentrations of omega-3 fatty acids are at a much higher risk of developing prostate cancer. A 2018 vast analysis of 10 large, randomized trials has revealed that taking omega-3 fish oil supplements was not associated with a significantly reduced risk of 1) death from coronary heart disease, 2) nonfatal myocardial infarction (heart attack), 3) any coronary heart disease events and 4) major vascular events. Somehow, omega-3 fatty acids have gotten a heart-healthy reputation without good evidence that they actually prevent major cardiovascular disease events.

In the America that I love, always rely on the scientific facts. Please check out my book, “*Fish oils (omega-3 fatty acids): Facts, Fantasies and Failures*” available at [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com).

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

Surgeon/Scientist/Patient Advocate

27439 Highway 441, Kentwood, LA 70444

985-229-6955 Home | 985-229-3760 – Fax | 985-514-0578 – Cell

rhowsmd@hughes.net | www.iwillfindthecure.org

