



Letter to the editor: The Pundit Speaks
By Randolph M. Howes, M.D., Ph.D.
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"Fish Oil Does Not Prevent Alzheimer's Disease"

Omega-3 fish oil supplement producers have claimed curative powers for diseases such as cancer, heart disease, dementia, ADD, ADHD, depression, bipolar disorder, dyslexia, dyspraxia, obsessive compulsive disorder, headaches and migraines. Also, it was claimed to decrease aggressive behavior, prevent learning disabilities and make kids smarter. Unsupported aggressive advertising has led to "soaring sales for fish oil." However, disappointing studies are now coming forth and supplements do not have the same benefits as do natural foods containing these same ingredients. Even though claims of being "heart healthy" persist, a large German study gave fish oil or dummy capsules to more than 3,800 people who had suffered a recent heart attack and found that after a year, there was no difference between fish oil pills or placebo. But, there is more bad news for fish oil. Even though data from a trial of over 800 older people initially showed that those who eat plenty of oily fish seem to have better cognitive function, a new study has found that omega-3 pills, promoted as boosting memory, did not slow mental and physical decline in older patients with Alzheimer's disease. This \$10 million project studied nearly 300 men and women, aged 76 on average, with mild to moderate Alzheimer's disease. They were randomly assigned to take either the omega-3 fish oil pill (DHA) or dummy pills daily for 18 months. Results were similar in both groups, in that DHA provided no benefits in slowing Alzheimer's symptoms nor did the pills work in a subgroup of participants with the mildest Alzheimer's symptoms. The researchers concluded, "There is no basis for recommending DHA supplementation for patients with Alzheimer disease." Laurie Ryan, program director of Alzheimer's studies at the Institute on Aging, called the results discouraging. Thus, Alzheimer's disease remains basically untreatable and the "fish oil gold rush" may be slowing.

In the America that I love, we realize that generally dietary supplements do not work, except in cases of known deficiencies or malabsorption syndromes. Still, sales of dietary supplements bring in about \$23 billion annually. We know that eating more heart-healthy omega-3 fats provided no additional benefit in a study of heart attack survivors who were already getting good care. There is little harm to fish oil when the ratio of omega-6 to omega-3 are properly balanced. Please remember the words of expert, Dr. Lichtenstein, "We need to be a little more cautious about the prediction of individual benefit of any nutritional supplements. People are so willing to embrace the simple answer, as if it's possible to crack a capsule over a hot fudge sundae and undo the harm of harmful diets and lack of exercise." But, give me a chocolate sundae. I'll take my chances.

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