

Fish oils – what the research says

Omega–3 and fish oil

Omega–3 fatty acids are important for our eyes and for parts of the brain used for memory, learning and reasoning. If we do not eat enough omega–3, these functions may be impaired. Omega–3 is an *Essential Fatty Acid*, found in fish and seafood. Many people who don't eat much seafood choose to take 'fish oil supplements', as these contain large amounts of omega–3. Research shows mixed results about the benefits of fish oils in children. This fact sheet explains what we do know.

Can fish oil help your child? – A research update

There has been a lot in the news lately about the positive effects of fish oil. The actual results of research however, are not always clear. This is a summary of current findings:

What we do know

- Children with ADHD are more likely to show symptoms of low omega–3 levels (eg. dry skin, dry hair, excessive thirst) and have lower levels of omega–3 in their blood than children without ADHD.
- There is some evidence that increasing omega–3 levels reduces the severity of ADHD–type behaviour, such as inattention, in some children. However not all fish oil studies have shown improvements in ADHD–type behaviour. There are not enough good quality studies for us to be sure of its benefit.
- Some children with reading difficulties have shown major improvement in their reading after taking fish oil, but again, we know of other studies that show no improvement.
- Fish oil supplements vary a lot in their content and some appear to provide more benefit than others.

What we don't know

- The effects of fish oil for children with no learning or behaviour problems. One study showed that healthy young adults who took fish oil showed improvements in attention. We do not yet know if this also happens in children.
- We do not know how many children show improvements in behaviour and learning after taking fish oil, or what influences this.

As you can see from above, there are mixed research findings about fish oil. There seem to be benefits in some children, but we need to do more research to confirm this.

Are there any side effects from taking fish oil?

Fish oil is generally considered safe. Some people complain of a fishy aftertaste and stomach upset after taking high doses of fish oil. Other possible side-effects include nausea, diarrhoea, belching (burping) or a rash. Some people also are at risk of problems with bleeding if they take very high doses.

Should my child take fish oil?

Your child should NOT take fish oils if they have a *known hypersensitivity* to fish oils, a *bleeding disorder* or are *taking anti-coagulant or antiplatelet medicine*.

Otherwise, taking fish oil is considered safe and may have some benefits. Every child is different – you may or may not see a difference in your child's behaviour or learning.

If your child has ADHD and is taking medication, they can also take fish oil. Speak to your child's doctor about this before you start. Fish oil *should not* be used instead of the usual medication without a doctor being involved.

For more information

- [ADHD – Stimulant medication](#)

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