Omega-3 polyunsaturated fats have received attention as a healthy nutrient in recent years. Scientific studies show that omega-3 fats may benefit heart health. Recent studies also suggest that omega-3 fats are important for brain development and vision. Experts recommend omega-3 fats as part of a healthy diet.

**What are omega-3 fats?**
Omega-3 fats are a type of polyunsaturated fat known to benefit heart health. There are three main omega-3 fats found in foods:
- Alpha-linolenic acid (ALA);
- Eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA); and
- Docosahexaenoic acid (DHA).

**All omega-3 fats are important**
It is important to eat a balanced diet that includes omega-3 fats from a variety of foods to ensure that you get sources of ALA, EPA and DHA. This is necessary because each of these omega-3 fats provides specific health benefits.

**ALA – an essential fatty acid**
ALA is considered an “essential” fat because your body cannot produce it. Therefore, you must eat foods that contain ALA to ensure that your body gets the necessary amount that is needed for healthy growth and development. Studies have found that higher intakes of ALA may help to prevent heart disease.

**EPA and DHA**
EPA and DHA are not considered essential because they can be converted in the body from ALA. However, since only very small amounts of ALA are converted, experts recommend that EPA and DHA also be a part of a healthy diet. High intakes of trans fat may slow the conversion of ALA to EPA and DHA, so it is best to choose a diet that is high in omega-3 fats and low in trans fat.

EPA plays a role in a number of compounds that help to protect heart health. DHA is important for the development and maintenance of cells in the brain, nerves and eyes. EPA and DHA also appear to protect against blood clotting, inflammation and other factors that contribute to heart disease.

**What are the main sources of omega-3 fats?**
ALA is found naturally in some plant-based foods. EPA and DHA are found naturally in marine foods, particularly fatty fish. A number of food products enhanced with omega-3 fats, such as eggs, bread and milk products, are also available. Table 1 (overleaf) lists the amounts of omega-3 fats found in some common foods.

The following are naturally occurring sources of omega-3 fats:
- **ALA** is found in canola, flax and soybean oils, and soft margarines made from these oils; ground flaxseed, soybean products (such as tofu) and walnuts.
- **DHA and EPA** are found mainly in fatty fish such as salmon, herring, sardines and rainbow trout.

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**Omega-3 fat tips**
- Flaxseed, walnuts, omega-3 enhanced eggs, and soft, non-hydrogenated margarines made with canola oil are sources of the omega-3 fat ALA.
- Your body will better absorb and benefit from the omega-3 fat ALA in flax seeds if you make sure the seeds are ground before you eat them.
- Limit commercially prepared battered and fried fish because it is low in omega-3 fats and high in trans fats.
- Consult a health professional before taking omega-3 supplements.
Simple steps to increase your intake of omega-3 fats

- Eat fish (such as salmon or rainbow trout) at least twice a week.
- Choose omega-3 eggs.
- Use a soft, non-hydrogenated margarine made from canola oil for spreading, cooking and baking.
- Use cooking oils that are rich in ALA, such as canola and soy oil.
- Lightly top your salads and steamed vegetables with flaxseed oil (do not cook with flaxseed oil).
- Snack on a small handful of walnuts.
- Choose whole grain breads that are enhanced with omega-3 fats.
- Sprinkle ground flaxseeds or walnuts on yogurt or cereal.
- Omega-3 fat supplements may also be considered in consultation with your doctor*. 

Remember, even if a food contains omega-3 fat, you should still look at the overall fat content on the Nutrition Facts panel to determine if it is a heart healthy choice.

When following a heart healthy diet, it is important to choose foods that are lower in saturated fat and trans fat. When choosing foods that contain omega-3 fat, ensure that they are also low in saturated and trans fat.

How much omega-3 fat should I consume?
The recommended Adequate Intakes of ALA for healthy adults are:

- 1.1 grams a day for women; and
- 1.6 grams a day for men.

There are no officially recommended Adequate Intakes for EPA and DHA, only for ALA. However, the guidelines do suggest that up to 10% of the recommended intake for ALA (as listed above) can come from sources of DHA and EPA. That means that 0.11 grams a day for women and 0.16 grams a day for men can come from EPA and/or DHA.

Table 1: Sources of omega-3 fatty acids

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>ALA</th>
<th>EPA + DHA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Walnuts, English (28 g, 14 halves)</td>
<td>2.6 g</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flaxseed, ground (15 mL, 1 tbsp.)</td>
<td>1.2 g</td>
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<tr>
<td>Flaxseed oil capsule (1,000 mg)</td>
<td>0.5 g</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soft margarine made with canola oil (10 mL, 2 tsp.)</td>
<td>0.4 g</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canola oil (5 mL, 1 tsp.)</td>
<td>0.4 g</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Omega-3 enhanced eggs (1 whole egg)</td>
<td>0.3 g</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Omega-3 enhanced whole grain bread (1 slice)</td>
<td>0.3-1.0 g</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salmon, Atlantic, cooked (90 g, 3 oz.)</td>
<td>1.8 g</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Herring, Atlantic (90 g, 3 oz.)</td>
<td>1.8 g</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salmon, Sockeye, canned (90 g, 3 oz.)</td>
<td>1.2 g</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trout, Rainbow, cooked (90 g, 3 oz.)</td>
<td>1.0 g</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Sardines, canned (90 g, 3 oz.)</td>
<td>0.9 g</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fish oil capsule (1,000 mg) (variable)</td>
<td>0.3 g</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Omega-3 enhanced eggs (1 whole egg)</td>
<td>0.1 g</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DHA-enhanced 2% milk (250 mL, 1 cup)</td>
<td>0.01 g</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

* Note: People taking more than 3 grams of omega-3 fat from supplements should do so only under a doctor’s care. High intakes of omega-3 may be harmful to some people so it is important to follow your doctor’s advice. Remember to count the omega-3 fat intake from both your food and the supplements that you take.