

# Essential fatty acids: key nutrients during pregnancy



Essential fatty acids are special kinds of fats that you can only get from food; your body does not make them. There are two types of essential fatty acids: omega-3 and omega-6.

Both are very important during pregnancy and lactation because they are necessary for human growth and development. While it is important to get a balance of essential fatty acids, this handout focuses on omega-3 because the “typical” North American diet tends to be low or deficient in omega-3.

There are three types of omega-3 fatty acids:

- Decosahexaenoic acid (DHA)
- Ecosapentaenoic acid (EPA)
- Alpha-linolenic acid (ALA)

DHA and EPA are found mainly in fish and fish oil. ALA is found mostly in seeds (like flaxseed), vegetable oils (such as soybean, canola and flaxseed oils) and in some leafy green vegetables.

## How essential fatty acids help you and your baby

Research shows that DHA and EPA are especially important for the mother and unborn baby. Omega-3 fatty acids are vital to the development of the baby’s brain, nervous system and eyes. The benefits to the mother may include lowered risks of pre-eclampsia, postpartum depression and preterm labor.

## Recommended amount

The general recommendation is that a pregnant woman should consume about 250 mg of DHA each day. With the exception of certain fish known for high mercury contamination (shark, king mackerel, tilefish and swordfish), eating a variety of seafood is essential to overall good health for you and your unborn baby.

Your goal should be to eat about 12 ounces of low-mercury seafood every week. Half (six ounces) of this can be white albacore tuna.

## About supplements

Fish oil supplements can help you get enough DHA and EPA omega-3 fatty acids. However, keep in mind that supplements are not always absorbed as well as food sources and they can have side effects. Choose the purest supplements. The Environmental Defense Fund’s web site ([www.edf.org](http://www.edf.org), click on seafood selector) provides information on the best fish oil supplements.

## Supplement side effects

Common side effects of fish oil supplements include:

- Gas
- Cramping
- Loose stools
- Fishy aftertaste

Many companies have changed their products to alleviate some of these side effects.

## Warnings:

- Tell your physician if you are taking blood thinners such as low-molecular weight heparin products.
- Consuming more than 3000 mg per day of omega-3 may cause bleeding.
- Avoid supplements made from fish liver oils during pregnancy as they have high levels of vitamin A, which can be associated with toxicity to the fetus.

See our handy chart of healthy sources of essential fatty acids on the reverse side.

**Food sources for DHA and EPA (from highest to lowest mg)**

<b>Food – 6 ounces (oz) cooked for fish unless noted</b>	<b>DHA + EPA milligrams (mg)</b>
Atlantic salmon, farmed	3,650
Atlantic salmon, wild	3,130
Rainbow trout, farmed	1,960
Rainbow trout, wild	1,670
Sardines, in water (2.8 oz)	1,500
Salmon, canned (Red, Pink or Blueback) 3 oz	1,200
Pacific oysters (3 oz)	1,170
Flounder	850
Sole	850
Sardines in vegetable oil, 3 oz	840
Halibut	790
Rockfish	750
Fish sticks (6)	680
Ocean perch	640
Scallops	620
Pacific cod	470
Yellowfin tuna, fresh	470

<b>Food – 6 ounces (oz) cooked for fish unless noted</b>	<b>DHA + EPA milligrams (mg)</b>
Blue crab (3 oz)	400
Catfish, wild	400
Haddock	400
Chicken of the Sea skinless boneless pink salmon, 3 oz	370
Dungeness crab, 3 oz	340
*Starkist chunk white albacore tuna in water, 3 oz	330
Catfish, farmed	300
Shrimp or Atlantic cod, 3 oz	270
Clams, 3 oz	240
*Starkist chunk lite albacore tuna in water, 3 oz	240
Smart Balance Omega Plus Buttery spread, 1 tablespoon	160
Land O' Lakes Omega-3 Eggs, 1 egg	150
Lobster, 3 oz	70
Breyers Smart! DHA Omega-3 Yogurt, 6 oz	30
Horizon Organic DHA Omega-3 Milk, 8 oz	30
Silk Plus Omega-3 DHA Soy Milk, 8 oz	30
Egg, 1 large	20

\*Limit albacore tuna to 6 oz per week.

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