

Eating fish is one of the smartest and simplest things you can do for your heart. Fish offer important heart-protective vitamins and minerals and contain very little artery-dogging saturated fat. Most important, fish are the best dietary source of omega-3 fats, which protect your heart in half a dozen ways, from lowering your blood pressure to cleaning your arteries. The research linking omega-3 fats to heart health is so strong that the American Heart Association urges healthy people to eat fish twice a week.

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But before you head to the seafood market, you should know that not all fish provide equal amounts of omega-3s and that consumption of some fish poses health risks. Certain wild fish are contaminated with mercury, a heavy metal that damages your nervous system and may increase your heart attack risk. And cancer-causing dioxins and PCBs, found in oceans and waterways all over the world, can accumulate in all types of fish, including some with high levels of omega-3s.

To make selecting your seafood easier, we single out five tasty, easy-to-find fish with high omega-3 levels--and tell you exactly which forms to buy and which to avoid. Although the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has no recommended intake of omega-3 fats, its Canadian counterpart, Health Canada, suggests that women get 1.1 g of omega-3 fats per day and men get 1.6 g. Adding these heart-healthy fish to your diet will help you achieve that goal.

Herring and Sardines

So many people don't eat these little fish, and that's a shame. Herring and sardines harbor some of the highest levels of heart-healthy omega-3 fats of all fish. ("Sardine" just means small fish, and what we call sardines in this country are actually young herring.)

WHY YOUR HEART LOVES THEM: Though fresh herring lead the pack when it comes to omega-3 content, all forms of herring and sardines provide respectable amounts. Depending on the species and how it was prepared, 3 ounces of herring gives 1.3 to 2 g of omega-3 fats. Three ounces of sardines canned in oil deliver 0.8 g of omega-3s.

BUYING TIPS: Most herring and sardines sold in this country are canned, smoked, or pickled, which makes them a perfect ingredient for a no-cook lunch. When buying them canned, look for ones packed in their own oil, olive oil, or water rather than in soybean or cottonseed oil, which are not as good for you. Canned sardines are available whole or filleted; the fillets taste milder (great for less adventurous palates), but the whole fish offer the benefit of calcium because you eat their bones. You won't often see fresh herring for sale (if you do, they may be marked "fresh sardines") but they're worth searching for; they have the most omega-3s and taste great on the grill.

Mackerel

If you like robust, savory flavors, mackerel's the heart-healthy fish for you.

WHY YOUR HEART LOVES IT: Three ounces of most species of cooked mackerel provide 1.1 to 1.7 g of omega-3 fats. However, one species, king mackerel, offers only 0.4 g.

BUYING TIPS: Select smaller species like Atlantic (Boston), Pacific (Jack), and Spanish mackerel, because they are high in omega-3s and low in mercury. Avoid king mackerel, which accumulates more toxins, including mercury, than other mackerel species because of its size. These toxins are worth your attention: Recent studies in Finland indicate a possible link between high mercury levels in the blood and a greater risk for heart disease. And the FDA advises pregnant women to avoid king mackerel because it contains high levels of mercury, which can cause damage to developing nervous systems.

Fresh mackerel is available year-round and tastes best when broiled or grilled. Cook it right away; its high oil content makes it extremely perishable. You can also buy this fish canned; mackerel packed in 4-ounce cans with olive oil generally has a milder taste than mackerel packed in 15-ounce cans.

Salmon

Boosting your omega-3 intake is easy when you choose salmon. This popular-fish tastes terrific no matter how you prepare it--baked broiled, grilled, poached, hot, cold, in salads, or in burgers.

WHY YOUR HEART LOVES IT: You'll get anywhere from 0.9 to 1.8 g of omega-3 fats when you eat a 3-ounce serving of salmon. Farmed salmon have the most total fat and therefore the most omega-3s, but wild salmon also have noteworthy levels of these heart-healthy fats.

BUYING TIPS: Wild-caught Pacific salmon is a great choice. Alaskan salmon earn particularly high marks for your health because they come from well-managed fisheries with clean waters. If you're standing at the fish counter puzzled by what's a wild fish and what's farmed, remember this rule: Sockeye salmon, keta (chum) salmon, and pink salmon--all Pacific species--are always wild. King (chinook) or coho may be wild or farmed. You can buy wild-caught salmon fresh from April to November. You may also find it in your store's freezer case. If you can't locate wild salmon in your area, you can mail-order it frozen from Seabear Salmon (800-645-3474; www.seabear.com). Most canned salmon is wild; cans labeled red salmon contain sockeye salmon, which has a more robust flavor than pink salmon, the other canned variety.

If you buy farmed salmon, you should be aware of some potential concerns, Salmon farmers may use antibiotics to control disease, which can lead to drug-resistant germs and render ineffective the antibiotics that we use to fight disease in humans. And the fishmeal fed to salmon may contain PCBs and dioxins, which then wind up in the salmon you buy. That's not to say that all farmed salmon is bad. More progressive fish farmers avoid

antibiotics by administering vaccines to protect fish while they're young. They also buy feed that has been rigorously tested. One good salmon farming company is Atlantic Salmon of Maine. Ask the seafood manager at your store if he buys farmed salmon from this company, or if he buys from another progressive fish farmer. Be aware that any product marked Atlantic salmon is farmed.

Trout

If you like to go fishing, chances are you've angled for trout. Its sweet, delicate, flaky flesh makes this fish a prize catch.

WHY YOUR HEART LOVES IT: Trout typically offer 0.8 to 1.0 g of omega-3 fats in a 3-ounce serving.

BUYING TIPS: Shopping for trout is easy; whatever you select will be good for your heart and your overall health. Almost all commercially available rainbow trout are farmed, but trout farming practices are generally safe for your health and the environment. For instance, most trout farmers use vaccines instead of antibiotics.

You may notice that some trout have a more vivid color than others, but the color of the flesh does not affect flavor or nutrition. Farmed trout is naturally pale in color; some companies add synthetic pigments to their feed to turn the trout flesh pink.

Tuna

Inexpensive and convenient, tuna ranks as this country's favorite fish; we buy more than 800 million pounds a year, mostly in cans. While it's a health-promoting food, tuna does contain relatively high levels of mercury. (Below we'll tell you how to buy the forms with the lowest levels of this heavy metal.)

WHY YOUR HEART LOVES IT: The amount of omega-3 fats in tuna varies greatly, from 0.3 g in 3 ounces of fresh yellowfin to 0.8 g in canned albacore (white) to 1.4 g in fresh bluefin.

BUYING TIPS: Your best choice here is canned tuna. While the process of canning causes the fish to lose some of its heart-healthy fat, canned tuna comes from smaller, younger fish and therefore has less mercury than fresh tuna. White tuna has more omega-3 fats than light tuna, but also slightly higher mercury levels. Buy canned tuna packed in water rather than oil because it retains more of its omega-3 fats after draining.

Fresh tuna steaks aren't a great choice. They come from larger, older fish, which harbor the highest mercury levels. And the tuna steaks sold in this country are usually yellowfin, a species with low levels of omega-3 fat.

If you're pregnant or trying to conceive, you should limit your consumption of canned tuna to one serving a month and avoid fresh tuna, says Jane Houlihan, vice-president of

research for the Environmental Working Group, a nonprofit organization based in Washington, D.C. Doing so will limit your exposure to mercury, which can damage developing brains.

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Catch These Fish, Too

Experts recommend that you eat a variety of heart-healthy fish to get the greatest benefit. These six piscatorial picks, because of their noteworthy omega-3 levels, also deserve a place on your plate.

Anchovies: These tiny fish show up mostly as flavoring in Caesar dressing and other foods. Although few people would actually eat this amount, 3 ounces of anchovies provide 1.8 g of omega-3 fats. You can buy anchovies canned, salted, or as paste.

Mussels and Oysters: These are the most omega-3-rich shellfish, providing 0.7 and 0.6 g of omega-3 fats, respectively. Plus they're a gold mine of important vitamins and minerals. You can find both shellfish year-round, but mussels taste best from fall through early spring. Oysters taste best in the late fall and winter.

Sablefish: Three ounces of sablefish (sometimes called black cod, though they're not members of the cod family) offer 1.7 g of omega-3 fats. Fresh sablefish are available year-round; you may also find them frozen or smoked.

Smelts: You'll get 0.8 g of omega-3 fats if you eat 3 ounces of these small, mild fish. You can find whole fresh smelts at the market, and you typically cook them whole.

Whitefish: Three ounces of this sweet, delicately flavored freshwater fish deliver 1.6 g of omega-3 fats. Whitefish fillets are sold year-round; you can buy them fresh or smoked. (Don't confuse them with flounder, haddock, or other lean fish generally referred to as "whitefish.")

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