Fish rich in essential nutrients for healthy aging

If you are near or over the age of 50, then you already know that as a person ages, the body functions differently from when you were 20. Genetic "weak links" begin to appear, and eating a diet that is short on essential nutrients can accelerate aging. Certain key nutrients tend to be lower in the diets of many older people. Fortunately, a few of these critical nutrients are found in fish.

**Question:** What nutrients in fish have been shown to be especially important and needed in a senior's diet?

**Answer:** Fish are good sources of protein, omega-3 fatty acids and the mineral selenium. Older people generally experience a decline in their body's muscle mass, and an adequate protein intake helps to minimize this loss. Although there are many other high-protein foods, fish is a highly digestible, high-quality protein source that is easy to eat. People with dentures often have difficulty eating other high-protein foods like beef, chicken and nuts, whereas properly cooked fish is tender and more easily eaten.

**Q:** How important are the components of fish oils?

**A:** The benefits of fish are most commonly linked with the omega-3 fatty acid components of fish oils. This is for good reason. Many of the common problems associated with aging have potential links to an inadequate intake of these essential fatty acids. For example, one of the more serious age-related declines in vision is macular degeneration. This condition has been linked to a low intake of several nutrients including the DHA and EPA fatty acids found in fish oils.

High levels of DHA are present in the retina of the healthy eye, so the link with degeneration of the macular area of the retina is logical.

The brain is another organ that has high levels of DHA. There is scientific support for adequate omega-3 fatty acid intake to support healthy brain aging, but once a condition like Alzheimer's disease is apparent, there is no evidence that fish oils can prevent or slow disease progression. There also is some evidence that EPA and DHA supplementation can help to prevent the depression sometimes associated with menopause.

Fish oil fatty acids also are known to help suppress inflammation. Consequently, fish oil supplementation often is prescribed as an adjunctive treatment for arthritis to help reduce joint inflammation.

Fish oil also helps to prevent blood clots. This "blood thinning" effect combined with the anti-inflammatory properties may be why an adequate intake of fish oil fatty acids is associated with cardiovascular health.

**Q:** Can you consume too much fish oil? **A:** Yes. However, it is not clear how much is too much. Due to the blood thinning effect, excessive intake of fish oils could increase the risk of internal bleeding. Some algae oils (vegetarian source) that are high in EPA and DHA have the same benefits and risks as fish oils.

**Q:** How important is the selenium in fish?

**A:** This mineral not only plays a critical role in antioxidant systems in the body, it also is required for normal production and function of thyroid hormone. When calorie needs decline with age, eating foods like fish that are rich sources of selenium becomes more important than ever. A 3- to 4-ounce serving of most types of fish contains enough selenium to meet a day's recommended intake of the nutrient. But don't overdo selenium supplements. Just six times the food label "Daily Value" exceeds the tolerable upper intake level.

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