

AskAnya

Anya Todd is a vegan registered and licensed dietitian who graduated from Case Western Reserve University and completed her internship at the Cleveland Clinic Foundation. Residing in Ohio with her husband and flock of rescued animals, Anya's daydreams involve starting a farmed animal sanctuary and a café specializing in cupcakes, especially of the chocolate chip-banana variety. Yes, even healthnuts have a sweet tooth.



Q: What are omega-3 fatty acids, and why do I need them?

A: Omega-3 fatty acid, also known as alpha linolenic acid (ALA), is considered an essential fatty acid. It is essential because the body does not produce it and is the first “ingredient” in a chain reaction that yields docosahexaenoic acid (DHA). Aren't you now wishing you paid a little more attention in Biochemistry? These fatty acids are renowned for their anti-inflammatory properties and in turn, aid in reducing one's risk of illnesses such as cardiovascular disease and diabetes.

Until recently, fish and fish oil were viewed as the only sources of omega-3 fatty acid, but times are changing. Walnuts, dark leafy greens, hemp seed, pumpkin seed, soy and canola oils are also good sources of omega-3; however, flax is the richest source of omega-3 fatty acid. Unlike fish, your risk of consuming toxins, such as mercury and lead, is essentially zero when consuming flax. And, you will not contribute to the needless death of any living creature.

Like with Vitamin B12, vegans need to make an effort to include omega-3 fatty acids in their diets. Along with omega-3 fatty acids, there are omega-6 fatty acids, which are found mainly in cottonseed, corn, sunflower and safflower oils. When we eat too many omega-6 fatty acids, we inhibit the absorption of omega-3 fatty acid. Ideally, we would be consuming a ratio of omega-6: omega-3 of 4:1; however, most vegans typically consume a whacked out ratio of 15:1!

So what does this mean for you? Ditch the corn oil for olive or canola oils. Flax should become your new best friend. Though there is no gold standard amount of how much flax one should eat, 1 tablespoon of flax oil or 2 tablespoons of ground flax seed per day is a great place to start. The oil can be added to dressings, hummus, or smoothies. Ground flax seed can easily be added to muffins, pancakes, and smoothies as well. Now go grab that coffee grinder and get to grinding!

Q: As a vegan, do I need to make an effort to get Vitamin B12?

A: The simple answer is YES! Vitamin B12 is absolutely essential to the body for maintenance of the nervous system. A deficiency can lead to neurological damage including blurred vision and memory loss. Recent research has also shown that adequate vitamin B12 levels can lower homocysteine levels in the blood, which is great news since elevated homocysteine levels can cause heart disease and strokes.

Unfortunately, there is no reliable plant food that will provide vegans with this essential vitamin. Therefore, it is critical to include a fortified food or supplement of Vitamin B12 in your diet. The daily recommended intake is 2.4 micrograms for healthy adults.

Many vegans feel that because Vitamin B12 is needed in such a little amount, they do not need to concern themselves with taking it regularly; however, deficiencies do occur. The news that it has protective cardiac properties should be reason alone to include Vitamin B12 in your daily food routine.

Fortified foods such as cereals, meat analogs, non-dairy milk, and fortified nutritional yeast are good choices. Two to three servings per day should provide the necessary intake of Vitamin B12. Supplements can be found in liquid and tablet forms, as well as through injections. If a tablet is chosen, one that is chewable will increase the vitamin's absorption. A supplement should provide at least 10 micrograms per tablet.

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