

ASK Anya

Anya Todd is a vegan registered and licensed dietitian who recently accepted a position at Rainbow Babies & Children's Hospital in Cleveland. She looks forward to teaching youngsters about the benefits of eating their fruits & vegetables.



Q: As a vegan, do I need to worry about my essential fatty acid intake?

If you are concerned about your brain or your heart for starters, then yes, being aware of your essential fatty acid (EFA) intake should be a concern. There are few things in life that are considered essential – meaning you cannot live without them. Hummus, PEZ dispensers, and mittens would be at the top of my list.

When it comes to our diets, “essential” is the term used because these nutrients must be obtained from our diets to maintain our health.

Deficiencies in EFAs are linked to heart attacks, depression, strokes, and Alzheimer's disease – among other conditions. Omega-3 and Omega-6 are the two main types of EFAs, along with Omega-9. The latter is not really essential, as Omega-9 is synthesized by the body, as long as enough Omega-3 and Omega-6 are available. Most of us consume enough Omega-6 fatty acids.

Also known as linolenic acid, Omega-6 is predominately found in vegetable oils, such as corn and soybean, as well as in nuts and seeds.

Relying on diets dependent on processed foods typically results in consistent Omega-6 fatty acid intake. Being that Omega-6 fatty acids are inflammation-causing by nature, it is thought that the increased prevalence of them in our diets is one of the reasons for the widespread occurrence of chronic diseases, like diabetes and heart disease.



In a perfect world, it is believed that our ratio of Omega-6 to Omega-3 fatty acid intake would be 1:1. This would give balance between the pro-inflammation effects of high levels of Omega-6 versus the anti-inflammation effects of Omega-3. However, it has been shown that many people have ratios closer to 10:1 – even 20:1! It is not hard to imagine when you realize which foods are rich in Omega-3 fatty acids. They are not the Standard American Diet fare.

Alpha linolenic acid, which is known on the streets as the less nerdy-sounding Omega-3 fatty acids, is abundant in the plant world. Soy, walnuts, flaxseeds and chia seeds – yes, as in the seeds found in “chia pets”! – are all reliable sources. This nutrient is essential in our diets in order to form the compounds EPA and DHA.

Now, the fish industry would like you to believe that fish oil is the only source of DHA, but that is simply not the case. Microalgae are a great source of DHA, known to many as the nutrient for helping brain development throughout the life stages.

Even products like soymilk are now being fortified with microalgae-sourced DHA. It is very easy to obtain this nutrient by cutting out the middleman – or middlefish in this case!

My advice: Keep processed foods to a minimum. (Whole foods taste better anyway.)

Add daily reliable sources of Omega-3 fatty acids (like a teaspoon of flaxseed oil added to cooked oats), and supplement DHA a few times a week – about 200 mg is considered an ideal amount. Your brain and heart will appreciate it.