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# DHA

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## DHA supplements could reduce postpartum depression

### The importance of DHA

Few people realize that the primary building material in the brain is fat. Indeed, a full 60 percent of the brain is composed of fats, of which DHA (docosahexaenoic acid), a long-chain polyunsaturated omega-3 fatty acid, is the most abundant. DHA is also the most abundant fat in the retina of the eye.

Human consumption of DHA (hence, the DHA levels present in humans) has declined in the last 50 years as we have attempted to improve our diets. We are eating fewer high-fat foods such as eggs, lard and organ meats, all of which contain DHA. Yet our intake of fatty acids determines to a large extent the make-up and function of brain-cell membranes.

### Adult requirements for DHA

True, the human body can produce DHA from another fatty acid, though it does not produce it efficiently. Furthermore, studies suggest that direct consumption of DHA is important for mental health and well-being, a growing concern as the U.S. population ages.

But there is more at stake here than the occasional forgetfulness that goes with aging. Epidemiological research in the United States and elsewhere shows a correlation between reduced intake of this fatty acid and the increased incidence of depression and dementia. In an article published in 1995 in *The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, authors Dr. Joseph R. Hibbeln and Dr. Norman Salem, Jr., of the National Institutes of Health note the documented increase in depression in North America during the last 100 years, the period during which DHA consumption has declined. Countries where DHA levels have remained constant have not experienced these increases in depression.

Alcoholism and post-partum depression likewise may be affected by declines in DHA, they write: chronic alcohol consumption can reduce DHA levels in the brain, and delivery of an infant reduces DHA levels in the mother's blood.

Studies have noted a similar correspondence

between the decline in an individual's level of DHA and the incidence of Alzheimer's disease. The brains of Alzheimer's patients show lower levels of DHA and of arachidonic acid (another long-chain polyunsaturated fatty acid) than do the brains of healthy geriatric patients. A change in the proportion of DHA relative to other fatty acids in the brain is likely to diminish mental functioning.

### DHA for infants

The most significant research on DHA involves infant brain development. During the late stages of fetal development and immediately following birth, the human brain grows very rapidly. The DHA content of the fetal brain increases three to five times during the final trimester of pregnancy and triples yet again during the first 12 weeks of life.

Studies have shown that pregnant women today have lower levels of DHA in the blood than pregnant women did previously. DHA levels in the breast milk of American women are now among the lowest in the world. In addition, following a pregnancy, DHA levels in the mother's blood are depleted.

Premature babies are especially at risk for DHA deficiency as are U.S. infants who are not breast-fed, due to the fact that U.S. infant formula is not enriched with DHA. One study has shown that the IQs of formula-fed infants are eight points lower, on average, than those of breast-fed babies.

The development of both the retina and visual cortex are similarly dependent on DHA. One study found that the eyesight of full-term babies fed DHA-enriched formula was measurably more acute than that of babies fed formula without DHA.

The World Health Organization has recommended that all infant formula be enriched with DHA, as it is in 24 countries around the world.

### Correcting DHA deficiencies

The same studies that show reductions in blood-DHA levels in American women reveal that

women whose diets include regular consumption of fish, a rich source of DHA, have not experienced declining DHA levels. For those who do not eat fish regularly, DHA supplements may be advantageous. Until recently, however, the only DHA supplements available were derived from fish oils, some of which have been reported to contain pol-lutants and toxins. A pure, vegetable source of DHA, extracted through a process developed by Martek Biosciences, is now available and is contained in many DHA

products carried by leading herbal supplement companies.

Low levels of the omega-3 fatty acid docosahexaenoic acid (DHA) after pregnancy are associated with postnatal depression, report researchers in a new study.

The results suggest that supplementing with DHA could reduce women's chances of the often debilitating symptoms.

Researchers from Maastricht University in the Netherlands measured DHA levels in the plasma phospholipids of 112 women at delivery and 32 weeks postpartum. Depression was measured at this point using the Edinburgh Postnatal Depression Scale (EPDS) questionnaire.

The results demonstrated that slower postpartum recovery of the functional DHA status is related to a higher risk for the development of postpartum depression.

Writing in the journal *Prostaglandins Leukotrienes and Essential Fatty Acids* (VOL 69, issue 4, pp 237-243), the authors note: 'Although further studies are needed for confirmation, increasing dietary DHA intake during pregnancy and postpartum seems prudent.

This study is consistent with other studies that show that populations with high intakes of omega-3 fatty acids have lower rates of depression than populations with low consumption of those fatty acids.

Omega-3 fatty acids have also been shown to help in the mental development of infants and to increase the gestation period.

