Seafood Omega-3s in Pregnancy and Infancy

Pregnancy—Nutrients for Two

Pregnancy is a special time to nourish mothers and their developing babies. Both depend greatly on the mother’s nutrition. Pregnancy increases the need for nearly all nutrients and some nutrients require additional intake during the second and third trimesters. Several of these nutrients are most abundant in fish—selenium and iodine, for example—and others are natural by-products of DHA, the omega-3 fatty acid. These nutrients, along with other long-chain polyunsaturated fatty acids (EPA and arachidonic acid) are critical for the baby’s brain and eye development.1,2 Maternal diets in most Western countries are low in DHA, so this nutrient deserves special dietary attention.3

DHA—Critical for Brain and Eye Development

DHA is an essential building block for the structure and function of the brain, nervous system, retina and eyes. It is needed for optimum brain growth and development of the infant’s nervous system, brain and eyes. Eating fish and shellfish during pregnancy and lactation provides several other important nutrients needed for the baby’s brain, nervous system, brain and eye.

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Where Do Mothers Get DHA?

Mothers get DHA from food sources. Some of this DHA is synthesized in plants and animals. U.S. women and children obtain DHA from fish, shellfish, and eggs, but may not obtain enough DHA from food alone. For example, they may not obtain enough DHA from eggs alone or if the eggs come from certain seed oils (e.g., flax, canola, walnut oils), but the amounts produced are very small and unlikely to meet the developed infant’s needs. The best way to ensure that the developing baby gets enough DHA is to eat fish, especially the fatty varieties. Women who eat DHA-rich fish, shellfish or food products supplemented with DHA can help ensure that their babies obtain DHA from breast milk or DHA-supplemented infant formula, as well as DHA from their own food sources. Premature and low birthweight newborns also need adequate DHA for normal visual development.4

Studies have shown that preterm and low birthweight babies develop better and have fewer health problems when they are fed DHA compared with babies fed unenriched formula.5,6

Providing DHA to Toddlers and Young Children

After 6 months of age when solid foods are introduced, infants can obtain DHA from egg yolks that contain this nutrient as well as from certain seed oils (e.g., flax, canola, walnut oils), but the amounts produced are very small and unlikely to meet the developed infant’s needs. The best way to ensure that the developing baby gets enough DHA is to eat fish, especially the fatty varieties. Women who eat DHA-rich fish, shellfish or food products supplemented with DHA can help ensure that their babies obtain DHA from breast milk or DHA-supplemented infant formula, as well as DHA from their own food sources. Premature and low birthweight newborns also need adequate DHA for normal visual development.4

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DHA in the First 6 Months of Life

The brain grows fairly rapidly in the first two years after birth, consuming an amount of oxygen equal to that of a small fish.7 DHA is important in early life. Breastfeeding ensures that the infant obtains DHA from mother’s milk. When breastfeeding stops, babies begin to obtain DHA from breast milk or DHA-supplemented infant formula and foods with DHA, such as fish and egg yolk.8

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Where Do Babies Get DHA?

Babies who obtain DHA from breast milk or DHA-supplemented infant formula score better on developmental tests compared with children who have consumed little or no DHA from their mothers and have no DHA stores. Preterm and low birthweight babies who have no DHA stores are more likely to develop learning or behavioral abnormalities.9-11

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