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Fish oil pills: Swimming into dangerous waters

There are health benefits, and health risks, in consuming fish oil. **Pooja Vig** and **Shefali Srinivas** learn more.

Nutritional supplements made from fish oil are growing more popular as new studies confirm the health benefits of omega-3 fatty acids. Sales of such supplements in the United States alone have more than tripled since 1998, reaching US\$190 million (S\$304 million) in 2003.

Yet several studies have shown that some fish oil supplements can contain unsafe levels of environmental pollutants such as dioxins and heavy metals such as mercury and lead.

Two weeks ago, popular cod liver oil supplement maker Seven Seas took two of its products off the shelves here. The recalled products contained impurities called dioxins which were slightly in excess of the limits set by the European Union.

The Health Sciences Authority (HSA) in Singapore alerted the public to the product recall but said those taking the product did not face health risks.

This is because dioxins are environmental toxins present in air, soil, water and food — and do not have an immediate effect on health.

But consumption of dioxins above safe levels over a lifetime may result in an increased risk of cancer.

Not a day goes by without research that points to the importance of omega-3 fatty acids in the diet.

Ms Samantha Thiessen, a nutritionist with Food and Nutrition Specialists in Singapore, said the omega-3 fatty acids in fish play a role in reducing the risk of heart disease.

The two fatty acids found in oily fish, eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA) and docosahexaenoic acid (DHA), have been recognised by The American Heart Association (AHA) as vital to sustain the heart.

More recent studies suggest that high

levels of omega-3 fats help reduce symptoms of mental health and developmental diseases, ranging from dyslexia to bipolar disorder.

The attention that fish oil has received is perhaps most apparent in two places — the supermarket and pharmacy shelves. Production of oily fish like salmon has increased 40-fold over the last two decades while pharmacy shelves now display a varied range of fish oil supplements.

While conventional wisdom always supports getting essential fats and vitamins from food sources, with fish, it is more complicated.

Experts say that neither fish on a plate or fish oil in a pill guarantees just the good, without the bad.

Take salmon for instance. It has long been touted as a miracle fish — good for the heart and skin. However, for

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The best and worst

Fish is a high-protein, low-fat food with a range of health benefits. White-fleshed fish is said to be lower in fat than any other source of animal protein, and oilier fish contain substantial quantities of omega-3s or the "good" fats. In addition, fish does not contain the "bad" fats commonly found in red meat, called omega-6 fatty acids.

Despite these health benefits, eating fish also means ingesting contaminants like mercury and polychlorinated biphenyls.

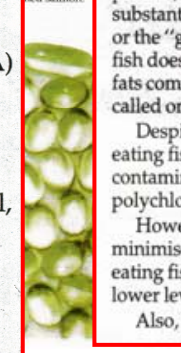
However, it is possible to minimise exposure to toxins by eating fish that are known to have

seals in chemical pollutants whereas grilling, broiling or poaching allows fat to drain away. Fat is usually where the pollutants are stored. Another precaution is not to eat the same kind of fish more than once a week.

The US group, Environmental Defense, lists the best and worst seafood choices:
Best: Atlantic wild salmon; Atlantic sea herring; US farmed abalone; US farm Atlantic mackerel; halibut; sardines; black cod; New Zealand Alaskan halibut
Worst: Atlantic halibut; farmed salmon; swordfish; shark

SHEFALI SRINIVAS

contains between 10 and 20 times more dioxins than that is not all,atives used wearing in increased salmon.



The levels of these compounds, which are thought to disrupt the body's hormonal system, are highest in farm-raised salmon from Europe.

Mercury contamination has been another major concern. While bad for everyone as it can harm the nervous system, it is most threatening to a developing fetus and the very young.

As a result, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) recommends that pregnant and nursing women, and young children, eat no more than 340g of fish per week.

The AHA suggests fish consumption should be tailored to age so as to balance the risks and benefits of eating fish. Fish might be more beneficial to some

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However, it is possible to minimise exposure to toxins by eating fish that are known to have lower levels of contaminants.

Also, avoid fried fish as frying

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Which brand to go for?

Environmental Defense, a leading United States non-profit organisation, has been studying fish and fish oil supplements since 1967. It has compiled a report on 75 brands of fish oil supplements across the world and rated them according to purity.

These are the only three brands available in Singapore which are listed as "Best Choice".



Nordics Naturals Omega 3 Lemon (1,000mg)
Price: \$29.90 for 60 soft gels
Nordics Naturals Arctic Cod Liver Oil (237ml)
Price: \$39.90
Where to buy: Vitakids, 583 Orchard Road, #B1-28/29/30, Forum, The Shopping Mall
Tel: 6733-4964



Shalkee Omega 3 Complex
Price: \$65.65 for 90 capsules
Where to buy: Guardian Pharmacy outlets

Usana Bio-Omega 3
Price: \$46.00 for 56 capsules
Where to buy: Independent Usana distributor. For more information, call 6820-8838

