

Fish

Australia's leading health research body, the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC), suggests that Australians should eat more fish. This is because fish is low in fat, high in protein and an excellent source of omega 3 fatty acids. Researchers worldwide have discovered that eating fish regularly – one or two serves weekly – may reduce the risk of diseases ranging from childhood asthma to prostate cancer. Healthy ways to enjoy fish include baked, poached, grilled and steamed.

Health benefits of eating fish

Regular consumption of fish can reduce the risk of various diseases and disorders. Selected research findings include:

- **Asthma** – children who eat fish may be less likely to develop asthma.
- **Brain and eyes** – fish rich in omega 3 fatty acids can contribute to the health of brain tissue and the retina (the back of the eye).
- **Cardiovascular disease** – eating fish every week reduces the risk of heart disease and stroke by reducing blood clots and inflammation, improving blood vessel elasticity, lowering blood pressure, lowering blood fats and boosting 'good' cholesterol.
- **Dementia** – elderly people who eat fish or seafood at least once a week may have a lower risk of developing dementia, including Alzheimer's disease.
- **Depression** – people who regularly eat fish have a lower incidence of depression (depression is linked to low levels of omega 3 fatty acids in the brain).
- **Diabetes** – fish may help people with diabetes manage their blood sugar levels.
- **Eyesight** – breastfed babies of mothers who eat fish have better eyesight, perhaps due to the omega 3 fatty acids transmitted in breast milk.
- **Inflammatory conditions** – regular fish consumption may relieve the symptoms of rheumatoid arthritis, psoriasis and autoimmune disease.
- **Prematurity** – eating fish during pregnancy may help reduce the risk of delivering a premature baby.

Foods rich in omega 3 fatty acids

The recommended daily amount of omega 3 fatty acids from fish is 200–600mg and from plants it is 1–2g.

The following are approximate amounts of omega 3 fatty acids per 60g serve of varieties of fish:

- Salmon (fresh Atlantic) 1,200mg
- Smoked salmon 1,000mg
- Canned salmon 500mg
- Sardines 1,500mg
- Trout (fresh rainbow) 350mg
- Gemfish 300mg
- Blue-eye, shark (flake), salmon, squid 250mg
- Scallop or calamari 200mg
- Sea mullet, abalone 170mg
- Canned tuna 145mg
- Orange roughy or sea perch 7mg.

The following are approximate amounts of omega 3 fatty acids per 60g serve of other foods:

- Two slices of fish oil enriched white bread 27mg
- Lean beef or lamb 40mg
- One fish oil enriched egg 200mg
- Fish oil enriched margarine (10g) 60mg
- One regular egg 40mg.

The best source of omega 3 fatty acids is fish, rather than fish oil capsules.

Fish oil reduces risk of heart disease

Hundreds of studies have been done on fish or fish oils and their role in the prevention or treatment of heart disease. A review in the *British Medical Journal* recommends fish or fish oil supplements to prevent heart attacks, particularly in people with vascular disease. How omega-3 fats reduce heart disease is not known, but they are known to lower blood triglycerides and blood pressure, prevent clotting, are anti-inflammatory and reduce abnormal heart rhythms.

A word of caution on mercury

While it is recommended to eat one to two fish meals a week, it is wise to avoid fish high in mercury. Excess mercury appears to affect the nervous system, causing: numb or tingling fingers, lips and toes; developmental delays in walking and talking in children; muscle and joint pain; increased risk of heart attack.

Fish high in mercury include shark, swordfish (broadbill) and marlin, ray, gemfish, ling, orange roughy (sea perch) and southern blue fin tuna. Pregnant women, nursing mothers, women planning pregnancy and children up to six years old should avoid these fish.

If catching and eating your own fish, don't fish in polluted waters. Bottom feeder species, such as catfish, may ingest more pollutants.

Types of fish cuts

The types of fish cuts available include:

- **Fillet** – the boneless flank of the fish.
- **Dressed** – with head and fins (entrails, scales and gills are removed).
- **Steak** – cross-sections taken from a dressed fish.
- **Gutted** – whole fish with entrails removed.

Healthy ways to cook fish

Healthy ways to cook fish include:

- **Baking** – make shallow cuts along the top of the fish. Put into a greased dish and cover with foil. Flavour with herbs, lemon juice and olive oil. Bake at around 180°C and baste frequently.
- **Shallow frying** – dry and flour the fish. Place a small amount of oil or butter in the pan. Fry the fish at a medium heat.
- **Grilling** – cut slashes into whole fish to help the heat penetrate the flesh. Place fish on a preheated grill. Baste frequently.
- **Poaching** – not suitable for flaky varieties. Place fish in gently simmering stock. Whole fish should be placed in a pan of cold stock, which is then slowly brought up to a gentle simmer.
- **Steaming** – put fish in a steamer or on a plate over a saucepan containing gently boiling water. Cover.

Cooking times for fresh fish

To estimate the cooking time of a fresh piece of fish, measure the meat at its thickest part. Suggested cooking times include:

- **One cm thick** – bake for 3 minutes, shallow fry for 4 minutes, grill for 5 minutes, poach for 8 minutes, steam for 3 minutes.
- **Two cm thick** – bake for 11 minutes, shallow fry for 7 minutes, grill for 6 minutes, poach for 10 minutes, steam for 7 minutes.
- **Three cm thick** – bake for 15 minutes, shallow fry for 10 minutes, grill for 9 minutes, poach for 12 minutes, steam for 11 minutes.
- **Four cm thick** – bake for 20 minutes, shallow fry for 13 minutes, grill for 11 minutes, poach for 13 minutes, steam for 14 minutes.

Cooking times for frozen fish

To estimate the cooking time of a frozen piece of fish, measure the meat at its thickest part. Suggested cooking times include:

- **One cm thick** – bake for 17 minutes, shallow fry for 7 minutes, grill for 12 minutes, poach for 10 minutes, steam for 5 minutes.
- **Two cm thick** – bake for 22 minutes, shallow fry for 11 minutes, grill for 15 minutes, poach for 15 minutes, steam for 11 minutes.
- **Three cm thick** – bake for 35 minutes, shallow fry for 15 minutes, grill for 24 minutes, poach for 22 minutes, steam for 13 minutes.
- **Four cm thick** – bake for 39 minutes, shallow fry for 18 minutes, grill for 28 minutes, poach for 28 minutes, steam for 16 minutes.

Sustainable fish shopping

All fishing has some impact, but some fish choices are far better than others. Some fish types may be overfished, associated with by-catch of birds or mammals (long lines used to catch swordfish also snare turtles, sharks, dolphins and seabirds), or may be killed in the process of commercial fishing for other species.

Where to get help

- An accredited practising dietitian, contact the Dietitians Association of Australia
- Australian Marine Conservation Society (for information about sustainable fishing).

Things to remember

- Eating one or two serves of fish weekly can reduce the risk of a range of diseases, from childhood asthma to prostate cancer.
- Healthy ways to enjoy fish include baked, poached, grilled and steamed.
- Avoid fish high in mercury such as shark, swordfish (brodbill) and marlin.
- Pregnant women, women planning pregnancy and children up to six years of age should choose the fish they eat carefully.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

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This Better Health Channel fact sheet has passed through a rigorous approval process. The information provided was accurate at the time of publication and is not intended to take the place of medical advice. Please seek advice from a qualified health care professional.

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