



Breaking News on Supplements & Nutrition - North America

Omega-3 deficiency causes 96,000 US deaths per year, say researchers

By Shane Starling, 26-Jun-2009

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Omega-3 deficiency is the sixth biggest killer of Americans and more deadly than excess trans fat intake, according to a new study.

The Harvard University researchers looked at 12 dietary, lifestyle and metabolic risk factors such as tobacco smoking and high blood pressure and used a mathematical model to determine how many fatalities could have been prevented if better practices had been observed.

The study, jointly funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) through the Association of Schools of Public Health, drew on 2005 data from the US National Health Center for Health Statistics. They determined that there were 72,000-96,000 preventable deaths each year due to omega-3 deficiency, compared to 63,000-97,000 for high trans fat intake.

Power of diet

"This is a very interesting analysis," said Andrew Shao, PhD, vice president of scientific and regulatory affairs at the Council for Responsible Nutrition (CRN).

"I think this analysis reinforces the long-held notion that the diet has a tremendously powerful impact on health and longevity and that the consumption of omega-3's (along with fruits and veggies) by Americans is far from adequate."

But he questioned the precision of the study findings due to complicating factors that had not been addressed.

"It is hard to say how definitive their findings are as far as the numbers are concerned, since chronic diseases and associated deaths are multifactorial," he told NutraIngredients-USA.com this morning.

"As far as diet goes, is it the lack of fruits and veggies or the excess animal and processed foods that is the culprit? It is hard to say."

He added that the study did not consider other key nutrients such as vitamin D.

Shao's counterpart at the Natural Products Association, Dan Fabricant, PhD, emphasized the potential public health care savings that could be derived from better nutrition, especially in tight economic times, but called for further study.

"We need more clinical research that nails down why omega-3 is so effective," Fabricant said. "This seems to be the last missing piece for omega-3s in terms of clarifying the picture for governmental/regulatory bodies of its efficacy."

Shao added the study highlighted the importance of establishing a dietary reference intake (DRI) for omega-3 forms, EPA (eicosapentaenoic acid) and DHA (docosahexaenoic acid).

"Once these requirements are established, the government can undertake initiatives to improved Americans' intake of these critical nutrients," he observed.

"But until that happens, Americans are likely to continue to fall short in their omega-3 intake, and we see a glimpse of what the consequence can be from this study."

Shocking

The study will do no harm to the omega-3 industry, with the world's leading supplier, Ocean Nutrition Canada, calling the results "shocking".

"...this new study validates that Omega-3 EPA/DHA is more than just part of a healthy diet...it's a matter of life and death," said Ocean Nutrition Canada's vice president of marketing and communications, Lori Covert.

"We know that daily doses of Omega-3 EPA/DHA can help with many conditions, such as cardiovascular disease, and we're committed to increasing consumer awareness about the drastic Omega-3 EPA/DHA deficiency in the Western diet," Covert said.

Tobacco smoking ranked as the highest risk factor with 436,000 to 500,000 attributed preventable deaths, followed by high blood pressure (372,000 to 414,000), obesity (188,000 to 237,000), physical inactivity (164,000 to 222,000), high blood glucose (163,000 to 217,000), high LDL cholesterol (94,000 to 124,000) and high salt intake (97,000 to 107,000).

The other risk factors were alcohol use; low polyunsaturated fatty acids; low fruits and vegetables intake and alcohol use.

Source: *Public Library of Science Medicine Journal*

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'*The Preventable Causes of Death in the United States: Comparative Risk Assessment of Dietary, Lifestyle, and Metabolic Risk Factors*'

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