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Omega-3 Fatty Acids Linked to Prostate Cancer Risk

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A new study will make people think twice about taking fish-oil capsules—or eating fish, for that matter. The *American Journal of Epidemiology* reports that men with higher levels of DHA, one of the omega-3 fatty acids found in fish oil, were at increased risk of developing [prostate cancer](#).



Researchers from Seattle's Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center looked at 3,461 participants in the Prostate Cancer Prevention Trial and found that men with the most DHA in their bloodstreams were two-and-a-half times more likely to have an aggressive form of [prostate cancer](#). Similar results were found in the European Prospective Investigation into Cancer and Nutrition study, where men who had the highest omega-3 levels had the highest risk for prostate cancer.

In many recent studies, fish oil has not lived up to its marketing claims.

Specifically, it is no help for heart patients, does not forestall [Alzheimer's disease](#), does not prevent depression, and—so far at least—does not make babies smarter.

Back in 2005, a *Journal of the American Medical Association* report showed that fish oil may actually increase the risk of cardiac arrhythmias in some patients. In the same year, *JAMA* also reported that fish oil does not prevent cancer.

The following year, the *British Medical Journal* reported that omega-3 fatty acids have no [heart-health](#) benefit. Among nearly 4,000 heart attack patients, no difference was seen between those who consumed omega-3 supplements and those who took placebo pills. That conclusion was [echoed in 2009](#), when researchers found that consuming fish does not reduce the risk of [heart failure](#). Then in 2010, the *New England Journal of Medicine* reported similarly dismal results with heart patients given omega-3 fatty acids in addition to standard drug therapy. They had no reduction in cardiovascular events.

Surprisingly, [Harvard linked](#) fish and omega-3 fats to [type 2 diabetes](#). Following 195,204 adults for 14 to 18 years, researchers reported in 2009 that they had found that the more fish or long-chain omega-3 fatty acids participants consumed, the higher their risk of developing diabetes.

Meanwhile, fish oil manufacturers pinned their hopes on brain function. Maybe fish oil will make you smarter, they reasoned. But last year, what researchers found dashed those hopes, too. A group of 867 elderly people were randomly assigned to either a fish-oil supplement or placebo. After two years of supplementation, elderly adults showed no benefit at all in tests for reaction time, spatial memory, and processing speed measurements. A later *JAMA* report showed that omega-3 supplements do not slow mental decline in Alzheimer's patients. And at the other end of the age spectrum, babies get no benefit either. A *JAMA* report showed that consumption of fish oil during pregnancy does not benefit babies' cognitive development.

In these reports, fish oil is starting to look a lot like snake oil. The new findings linking higher DHA levels to cancer add yet another reason to [skip fish and fish oil supplements](#).

Are you a health professional? Learn more about diet and cancer for continuing education credits at [NutritionCME.org](#).

In case you're interested in the references for these studies, here they are:

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