

MAKE FISH YOUR MAIN DISH

DISPELLING FISH TALES

How much fish are we recommended to eat?

In the UK and Ireland, it is recommended that we eat at least two portions of fish a week, of which at least one should be oily.

The majority of the population in the UK and Ireland do not consume enough fish, particularly oily fish. Reports suggest that a population-wide increase in oily fish consumption to the recommended one portion per week, from current levels of around just a third of a portion per week, would see significant public health benefits.

So why aren't we eating enough fish?

Young children (1-10 years) are consuming the least amount of fish across the population.

Common barriers include unpleasant smell, dislike of bones, difficulty with preparation and fear of pollutants. The rise of convenience foods has led to a reduction in fish intake and variety. Seventy-two percent of adults aren't even aware of the recommendations for weekly fish consumption!

But let's not forget - larger fish usually come with their heads, tails and bones removed for easier preparation. Due to short muscle fibres found in fish flesh, fish is extremely quick and easy to cook and there's no tenderising to do, and smoked or tinned fish, such as mackerel and salmon, require no cooking whatsoever.

What Types of Fish are in the diet?

Oily Fish - examples include sardines, mackerel, salmon, trout and herring, these fish contain their fat in their flesh (5-20% fat). The fats found in oily fish are known as "long chain n-3 polyunsaturated fatty acids" - better known as Omega 3's.

There is strong evidence that eating fish, in particular oily fish, reduces the risk of heart disease, which is thought to be due to its' omega-3 content. Omega 3 is also important for healthy brain development and for healthy joints and bones.

There is also an association between higher intake of fish and lower risk of stroke, dementia and Alzheimer's disease, as well as a slower rate of cognitive decline.

White Fish - examples include cod, haddock, bream, bass and turbot, these fish have a very low fat content in their flesh (1-2% fat) as they accumulate fat stores in their livers. See some of the benefits of having fish in your diet.

What are the important nutrients found in fish?

Fish contains many nutrients that make it a key part of a healthy, balanced diet.

Oily fish is the main food source of long-chain omega-3 fatty acids (DHA and EPA). Fish is also the richest source of Vitamin D in the human diet, essential for good bone health.

Fish is an excellent source of dietary protein. White fish and shellfish tend to be very low in fat and saturated fats, making it a great lean protein source.

Fish also contains many other vitamins and minerals, including B vitamins, selenium, iodine, and calcium and phosphorous from fish where the bones are eaten, such as canned sardines (but don't let this put you off – they are so small you can barely notice!)

The nutrient content is influenced by a few different factors, such as season, environment (e.g. farmed or wild) and cooking method (e.g. water soluble vitamins such as B-vitamins can be lost in poaching, and frying can increase the fat content).

The intakes of some of these nutrients, particularly selenium (a powerful antioxidant) and iodine (supports metabolism), are low in some population groups. Increasing fish intake can help provide these important nutrients.

What about pollutants in fish?

It has been acknowledged by a number of health authorities that certain pollutants in seas and oceans can accumulate in fish, more so in oily fish because the pollutants accumulate mostly in the fat cells. The pollutants usually include contaminants coming from industrial waste. Fish such as canned tuna, shark, marlin and swordfish are known to carry the highest pollutant content.

There are certain population groups where a build-up of pollutants could be more harmful, such as pregnant and breastfeeding women, and children under 16. These populations are recommended to avoid shark, marlin and swordfish because of the slightly higher mercury content.

However, for the general healthy population, consumers may be worrying unnecessarily as it has been suggested that the health benefits of eating fish far outweighs the potential detrimental effects of consuming pollutants at such small levels. (Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition 2004, 2018).

The “Big 5”

Increasing intake on a population level would put more strain on fish stocks. Consumers are often very reliant on the “Big 5” – cod, haddock, tuna, salmon and prawns – the majority of which are currently being overexploited. These are perceived as being relatively “familiar” varieties that most of us widely consume, so how about opting for other varieties, such as Sea Bass, Hake, Mackerel, Herring, Plaice and Pollock?

Sustainability and overfishing is widely recognised as being one of the key conversational topics surrounding fish consumption. Consuming sustainably sourced fish should be one of the most important considerations when increasing your fish intake. Knowing how to identify and shop for sustainably sourced fish is hugely important – you can read more about this in our next blog, “Sustainable Sourcing”.

We know the benefits, but are you eating enough fish? Have a look at your current intake and see if you could make a few simple swaps or additions – for more inspiration and meal ideas, take a look at our fish recipe cards!

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