

Healing & Disease Reversal The Series

by Albert Cilia-Vincenti

This series explores Dean Ornish's 30-year research experience into healing & disease reversal by dietary and lifestyle changes. He is a Californian University Professor of Medicine in San Francisco.

The good news, according to Dean Ornish, is that it's not difficult to eat and live in a healthy way. These articles, summarising his programme, amount to a scientifically proven field guide to help distinguish fact from fiction, hype from hope.

Ornish says he never intended becoming a veteran of diet wars. He has been forced into debating the late Dr Atkins at scientific meetings of the American Heart Association, the American College of Cardiology, and the American Dietetic Association, where he usually found himself described as the "low fat" doctor and Dr Atkins the "low carb" doctor. He insists that was not accurate, because he has always advocated that an optimal diet is low in total fat, very low in "bad fats" (saturated fat, hydrogenated fats, trans-fatty acids), high in "good carbs" (fruits, vegetables, whole grains, legumes and soy products), low in "bad carbs" (sugar, white flour), and that has enough of the "good fats" (omega-3 fatty acids) and high-quality proteins.

We need practical, clear, scientifically based information and not controversies between experts. Many people feel more bewildered than ever when they hear seemingly contradictory advice about different diets, and in fact a convergence of recommendations is evolving. Some significant differences remain, but a greater consensus is emerging among nutrition experts.

The first rule in Ornish's programme is to consume some omega-3 fatty acids every day. Omega-3 fatty acids are found in cold-water fatty fish (salmon, mackerel, herring, trout, sardines, albacore tuna), as well as canola (rapeseed), soy-bean, flaxseed and walnut oils. (In contrast, olive oil does not contain much omega-3 fatty acids). They are also present in smaller concentrations in dark green leafy vegetables such as kale and collard greens.

Omega-3 fatty acids reduce blood triglycerides, lower blood pressure, and decrease inflammation (hence reducing symptoms of arthritis, dermatitis and other inflammatory diseases as well as autoimmune diseases such as lupus). They reduce inflammation in blood vessels walls and prevent blood clots, thus decreasing the risk of heart attack and stroke. They also help prevent irregular heartbeats such as atrial fibrillation, another potential cause of stroke. Studies have in fact shown a potential reduction of risk of sudden cardiac death by 40-90% by stabilising the heart rhythm; the American Heart Association recommends at least two servings of cold-water fatty fish per week.^{1,2}

Other benefits are claimed for omega-3 fatty acids. They are important components of all our cell membranes, including neurons and, when given to pregnant and lactating women, they increase IQ and reduce incidence of allergy in the offspring, and also reduce the risk of maternal postpartum depression.³ They also decrease the risk of dementia, improve immunity and reduce the risk of prostate, breast and colon cancer.

In non-breast-fed babies, omega-3 fatty acids-enriched feeding formulas have been shown to increase intelligence test scores by up to seven points. A study published in The Lancet stated that children of mothers who consumed more than 340 grams per week of omega-3 fatty acids-rich seafood had higher IQs, better behaviour, fewer problems with their peers, less hyperactivity, fewer emotional disorders and better communications skills than those mothers who consumed less or no seafood.⁴

Ornish says he's been taking fish oil capsules (3g daily) for many years and advises practically everyone to do the same. It is advisable to take a high quality fish oil (not cod liver oil) which has been purified of all possible fish pollutants, such as mercury, dioxin and PCBs. This gives all the benefits of omega-3 fatty acids without the extra fat, calories and pollutants that come with eating fish.

Are omega-3 fatty acids universally beneficial? There are conflicting reports about their usefulness in heart failure, some claiming benefit and others a dangerously negative effect, so caution would need to be exercised in this serious situation. For most people, omega-3 fatty acids are highly beneficial.

Can you consume too many good fats? One of the few remaining differences in the consensus of what constitutes an optimal diet has to do with how much "good fat" to include in your diet. Is olive oil the healthiest fat? In a word, no – it's a better fat but not the best one. The Harvard School of Public Health, and some authors of popular books, have promoted the idea that it doesn't matter how much fat you consume as long as it's "good fats", such as olive oil. While good fats are better than bad fats, the total amount of fat in your diet also plays an important role. Oils are 100 per cent fat, and because fat has more than twice the calories per gram compared to those of protein and carbohydrates, it's very easy to consume a lot of extra calories if you have a lot of fat. So remember ... dipping bread in olive oil and pouring it on salads does increase substantially your caloric consumption!

References

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