

Food HEALTHY FAT

3 Types Of Omega Fatty Acids—And Why It's Crucial That You Know The Difference

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On a recent trip to her local Costco, Sonya Angelone, RDN, noticed a box with the message "Good source of omegas!" plastered across the

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package. While other shoppers might have tossed it in their cart without question, Angelone, a California-based dietitian and spokesperson for the American Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, knew better. "I wondered what kind of omegas they were talking about."

There are actually three different kinds of omega fatty acids, and it turned out that the box contained avocado oil, which has mostly omega-9 fatty acids—which are very different from the [healthy omega-3s](#) that are found in fish. Here's what you should know about each of them and the role they ought to play in your [diet](#). (Take back control of your eating—and lose weight in the process—with our [21-Day Challenge!](#))

What the heck is an omega?

First, a quick chemistry lesson: Fats are like brick walls, and they're all made up of fatty acids. Fatty acids are like the bricks used to build the wall.

All fatty acids have an even number of carbon atoms that are attached to each other in a chain. Some have single bonds between the carbon atoms—those are [saturated fats](#), like butter. Those that have double bonds are considered unsaturated. Omega-3s, -6s, and -9s are all types of naturally unsaturated fats, which most experts consider to be far healthier than saturated ones (unless they've been turned into [trans fats](#), that is).

OK, back to the chemical structure for just a moment. The beginning of the carbon chain is called the "alpha" end and the opposite one is called the "omega" end. Omega-3s have "3" in their name because the



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first double bond of the molecule is located three carbon atoms away from the omega end. (You can now probably guess how omega-6s and omega-9s got their names.)

If you followed all of that, give yourself a pat on the back. But if your eyes started to glaze over, that's OK, too. Up next: What you really need to know about these fatty acids from a nutrition standpoint.

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Omega-3s

Your body can't make these by itself, so you have to eat some or take a supplement, or you'll end up with a deficiency, says Angelone. There are three basic kinds—alpha linolenic acid (ALA), EPA, and DHA. ALA is found in plant foods like [walnuts](#), chia seeds, flaxseed, and some specialty eggs.

EPA and DHA are found in fatty fish like salmon, mackerel, and herring. EPA is [anti-inflammatory](#), and it appears to reduce the risk of conditions like heart disease, cancer, and rheumatoid arthritis. DHA plays an important role in brain health.

Bottom line: You need omega-3s, they're good for you, and [you're probably not getting enough](#). (Most Americans aren't.) The [American Heart Association recommends](#) eating two servings of fatty fish a week. "About a quarter of the fat you eat should ideally be from food rich in omega-3s," says Angelone.

MORE: [6 Things Omega-3s Can Do For Your Health—And 3 Things They Can't](#)

Omega-6s



ALEKSANDRS SAMJILOVŠ/SHUTTERSTOCK

As with omega-3s, your body can't produce these, so you need to eat them. But there's a pretty good chance you already are—and you're probably overdoing it.

Omega-6s are mainly found in [vegetable oils](#) like corn oil, safflower oil, sesame oil, peanut oil, and soy. "Most fats in the American diet are high in omega-6s, as well as saturated fat," says Angelone. (In case you were wondering, there's no dietary requirement for saturated fat, so the less you eat the better.)

Angelone adds that while omega-6s do play an important role in the body, if you have too many more of them than omega-3s, [you end up causing inflammation](#). "Most people are getting 15 to 25 times more

omega-6s than omega-3s," she says.

Bottom line: Omega-6s are healthier than saturated fat, and you do need some. But getting too much can be dangerous, so try to scale back. Or just focus on upping your intake of omega-3s, and you should automatically start to shift the balance in a good way.

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Omega-9s

Unlike omega-3s and omega-6s, omega-9s are *not* considered essential. Your body can make these, so even if your intake is zero, you won't end up with a deficiency. You'll find omega-9s in [canola oil](#), sunflower oil, almonds, avocados, and olive oil. (Yes, [olive oil](#) also contains omega-3s, but it's mostly omega-9s.)

"Omega-9s aren't required, but they have their own health benefits," says Angelone. For example, eating them in lieu of saturated fats [can help lower your cholesterol](#). And emerging research is finding that certain omega-9-rich foods, [like avocados](#), might play a role in reducing your risk of diabetes and heart disease.

Bottom line: Omega-9s are nice to have, as they're a good source of energy and may provide some health perks. Just don't go too crazy. They're not essential, and as with all fats, the calories from them can quickly add up. A few slices of avocado on your salad? Great. Just don't eat an entire bowl of guacamole.

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