

Time to clarify omega-3 types for consumers

02/11/2007 - **A survey of omega-3 labels on foods sold in major supermarkets found many were confusing to consumers.**

According to consumer watchdog *Which?*, some food companies were failing to distinguish to shoppers the different types of omega-3s; ALA, DHA and EPA.

EPA (eicosapentaenoic acid) and DHA (docosahexaenoic acid) are derived from marine sources such as oily fish, and DHA can also be derived from microalgae. ALA (alpha-linolenic acid) is derived from plant sources such as flaxseed.

Finished products containing EPA, DHA or ALA can claim to be sources of "omega-3", yet EPA and DHA are significantly more bioavailability than ALA. The shorter long-chain [omega-3](#) fatty acid ALA is a precursor to DHA, and has to be converted by the body before it can be used.

While EPA and DHA are 20- and 22-chain chain carbons respectively, ALA is an 18-carbon. Some of the cognitive, heart health and antioxidant benefits are lost in the conversion process elongating ALA's carbon chain.

In the group's November edition, *Which?* found some labels simply referred to just omega-3 without saying which type. In one example, an analysis of a product found it contained less than 0.002 per cent EPA and DHA.

Other products failed to inform shoppers how much omega-3 they would need to consume to benefit from any positive effects.

The results add to a need for regulators, including the European Food Safety Authority, to establish a recommended daily amount for omega-3 to help consumers. It is a situation which could also be addressed by the forthcoming European health claims regulations.

Researchers told *which*: *"The type of omega-3 found in oily fish is the best kind. There's no question that EPA and DHA are vital for our hearts, brains and immune systems.*

"But some food labels are muddling together things that have different biological effects. Omega 3 from vegetarian sources is very different and does not have the same health benefits."

In 2004, the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition (SACN) and Committee on Toxicity concluded that a minimum of 0.45g of long-chain fatty acids a day, or 3g a week, as part of a healthy, balanced diet, help keeps your heart in good shape.

In an effort to let consumers know not all omega-3s bring equal benefits, 12 ingredients makers - including Cargill, Ocean Nutrition Canada and Martek Biosciences - last year joined forces to create the Global Organization for EPA and DHA Omega-3 (GOED).

GOED was formed out of the dissolution of the Council for Responsible Nutrition's omega-3 working group, and it aims to take on a broader mandate more suited to a trade association.

The trade association formed to increase the EPA/DHA market and advocate regulatory approvals internationally for the fatty acids - concretizing an emerging movement to raise public awareness of the longer chain omega-3s and differentiate them from ALA.