

It used to be that fat was considered the “f” word in the bodybuilder’s diet. But thanks to years of research, dietary fat is no longer the enemy: just because you eat fat doesn’t mean you’ll get fat. In fact, eating the right types of fats can help you lose bodyfat, gain muscle and protect your joints, and offers a host of other health benefits including lower blood pressure and cholesterol levels and a reduced risk of cardiovascular disease, diabetes and some cancers. Sound too good to be true? Read on.

The terms healthy fats and good fats generally refer to unsaturated fats. Two types of these exist: monounsaturated and polyunsaturated, the latter of which includes essential fats such as omega-3 and omega-6 fatty acids. Foods high in monounsaturated fats include nuts; avocados; and olive, canola and peanut oils.

Quality sources of polyunsaturated fats include corn, safflower, sesame, canola, soya and sunflower oils; nuts and seeds; and cold-water fish. The best food sources of omega-3s are flaxseed, walnuts and fish such as herring, mackerel, salmon, sardines and tuna.

Although eating a diet rich in these foods can provide an ample supply of most healthy fats, it’s often difficult to get in enough essential fats. Other types of fats also offer bodybuilding benefits. To obtain adequate amounts of these from whole foods may be difficult; therefore, fat supplements are a vital component of your diet. You may not feel their effects immediately as you do with some products, but without them you could compromise your gains in the gym.

FISH OIL

If you take home only one point from this article, it should be: Take a fish oil supplement. Besides a multivitamin/mineral, fish oil may be the most critical bodybuilding supplement you can take. It contains the essential omega-3 fatty acids eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA) and docosahexaenoic acid (DHA), which provide numerous health and performance benefits. These fatty acids reduce the risk of heart disease and stroke, and offer a whole shed load of other health benefits as well, like boosting immune and brain function.

In addition, they help prevent muscle breakdown, increase muscle growth, enhance joint healing and encourage fat loss. One of the main mechanisms by which omega-3s provide these benefits is through their conversion to prostaglandins. These hormone-like substances positively affect blood vessel, skin and joint health and many other bodily processes; they also

help build muscle mass and promote thermogenesis.

Dosage: Take 2-6 grams of fish oil (e.g. Maxi-EFA) per day with food in two divided doses.

FLAXSEED OIL

Flaxseed offers the same beneficial essential fats found in fish oil, but it's not an exact replacement: flaxseed doesn't supply EPA and DHA like fish oil, but it does provide the omega-3 alpha-linolenic acid, which your body can convert to EPA and DHA, although there's some debate about this assertion. One study found that less than 1% of 1 gram of alpha-linolenic acid given to healthy subjects was converted to EPA, while 63% of that amount was converted to DHA. The most recent study, though, found that when subjects consumed 3 grams of flaxseed oil per day, their EPA levels rose 60% and their DHA levels rose 25%. Another study found that alpha-linolenic acid increased DHA levels in the brain but not the heart or liver.

While it's uncertain if alpha-linolenic acid can provide the health benefits associated with EPA and DHA, many athletes supplementing with flaxseed oil report that it benefits performance. Flaxseed does make a great addition to protein shakes taken before bed. Its healthy fats slow digestion and provide a steady source of amino acids to your muscles through the night.

Dosage: Take 2-3 tablespoons of flaxseed oil along with 20-40 grams of casein protein or whey protein mixed with milk before bed. Flaxseed oil should be kept refrigerated once opened.

GAMMA LINOLENIC ACID (GLA)

GLA is derived from the omega-6 fatty acid linoleic acid. Although you probably get ample omega-6s in your diet, you may still be deficient in GLA because many oils containing omega-6 fats are hydrogenated, which inhibits the conversion of linoleic acid to GLA. Since GLA is the precursor for many prostaglandins, if your body produces inadequate amounts of GLA, it will produce inadequate amounts of prostaglandins, which could inhibit fat loss and lead to poor muscle growth.

Dosage: Take 1-2 grams from sources such as borage oil, blackcurrant seed oil and evening primrose oil 2-3 times a day with food.

CONJUGATED LINOLEIC ACID ([CLA](#))

[CLA](#) is a naturally occurring group of derivatives of linoleic acid. This healthy fat is found in meats and dairy products. With grain replacing grass feeding of livestock, the [CLA](#) content of most meat and dairy products has severely declined. Even if you eat plenty of meat and dairy, it's still a good idea to supplement

[CLA](#)

. Research shows it offers health benefits including enhanced immune function and reduced risk of cancer and heart disease.

More important, [CLA](#) can stimulate muscle growth while simultaneously promoting fat loss. Studies on [CLA](#) reveal that it may enhance fat loss by decreasing the amount of fat that ends up being stored in adipocytes (fat cells) and boosting the metabolic rate. Some research even suggests that it can increase the amount of fat the body burns during sleep. Just remember, [CLA](#) must be taken consistently for several months to experience its benefits.

Dosage: Take 1-3 grams of [CLA](#) 2-3 times a day with food.

MEDIUM-CHAIN TRIGLYCERIDES

MCTs are a special type of saturated fat found in coconut oil, palm-kernel oil and butter. While most nutritionists consider any type of saturated fat unhealthy, MCTs actually do possess health benefits. The difference between the “bad” saturated fat and MCTs is the length of the fat molecule. MCTs are much shorter than most other dietary fats, which gives them some novel properties that make them ideal for bodybuilders. For one, they're less calorically dense than longer fats. Most dietary fats contain about 9 calories per gram, while MCTs contain about 8.

Another benefit: MCTs aren't stored in the body's fat cells like other fats; instead, they're used preferentially by muscles for fuel. When the body breaks down MCTs, they form compounds called ketones, which numerous bodily tissues use for fuel; ketones also help prevent the destruction of muscle fibres, leading to greater muscle growth. Research shows that consumption of MCTs can boost metabolism and lipolysis (the removal of fat from fat cells so it can be burned for fuel by other tissues, like muscle). Some studies have even found that MCT supplementation enhances protein utilisation by the body, which can lead to greater increases in muscle mass. Newer research indicates that MCTs can benefit the immune system as well.

NOTE: Some high-quality weight gainers (i.e. Progain by Maximuscle) contain MCTs as well as

essential fats.

Dosage: Take 1-2 tablespoons of MCT oil with food 1-4 times a day. To avoid possible stomach upset, start with the lowest dose and slowly work up. Diabetics should consult with their doctor before consuming MCTs.

SOURCE: Muscle & Fitness