

SCIENCE & WELLNESS

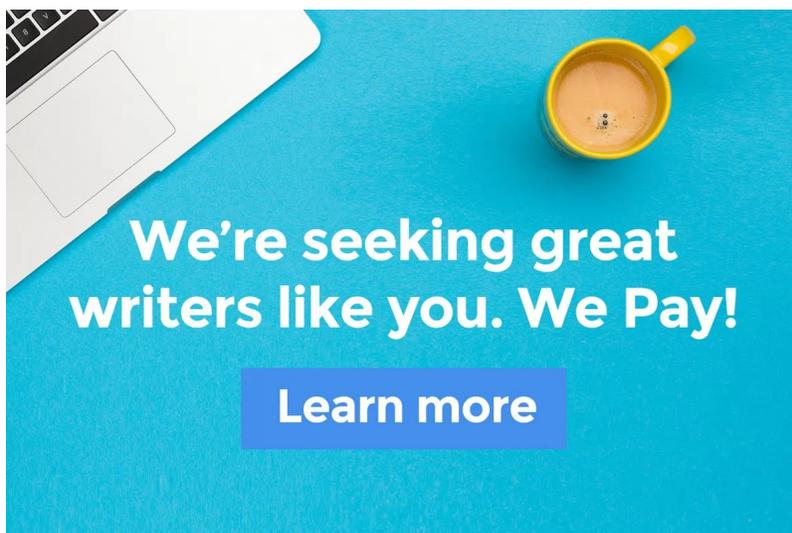
Can DHA Supplements Really Enhance Your Kids' Intelligence?

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[April 24, 2017 \(April 24, 2017\)](#)

Have you ever chosen a product for your children because you were promised it would make them smarter? Ever wonder if it really works?

If you walk the grocery store aisle looking for baby formula, you will notice that most brands claim that your children will benefit from the DHA added to their product. DHA, or docosahexaenoic acid, is an Omega-3 fatty acid naturally found in fish and fish oil that is necessary for babies' brain and eye development.

During pregnancy and the first few years of life, DHA accumulates in the brain and retina of the eye and plays a critical role in neural and vision development. Breastmilk contains DHA in varying concentrations, depending on how much is in the mother's diet.



During the 1990's, studies found that formula-fed babies had lower levels of brain DHA than breast-fed babies. At the time, experts suggested that adding DHA to formula would improve cognitive and vision development. This advice became so widespread that in 2002 the Food and Drug Administration approved adding DHA to infant formulas. Eventually the market took over, and DHA supplements in formula and milk marketed to kids has become the norm.

Recent studies indicate that this promise of enhancing your child's intelligence with the addition of DHA does not ring true, according to a recent New York Times article. A review of multiple studies released in March by Cochrane Neonatal Group concluded that there was no clear evidence that formula supplementation with DHA has any effect on children – good or bad.

The review combined data from 15 randomized controlled trials into a meta-analysis including 1,900 children who were tracked from infancy to mid-childhood. Some studies found small improvements in vision or cognition, but many did not. When the results were assessed overall, researchers found no clear pattern of any benefit from DHA added to formula. They did indicate, however, that it is completely safe to add DHA to formula.

These findings are consistent with two other recent studies. The first was published in October 2016 by the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality. It involved a review that covered the effects of omega-3-supplements in pregnancy and infancy. Researchers found little evidence of any benefit from adding DHA.

An Australian study on prenatal DHA supplements looked at 800 women and their children. Researchers randomly supplied women with either a daily DHA supplement or a placebo during the last half of their pregnancy. Then they tested their children's cognitive abilities at 18 months, 4 years old, and 7 years old. Overall, the study authors found no evidence that the DHA supplements affected the children's intelligence.

It is not clear if this new evidence will cause the industry to stop adding DHA to children's products, because it does slightly increase the cost of the products. The overall message for pregnant women is to make sure to consume enough DHA directly from food because that is the most effective and proven way to ensure that your baby receives adequate amounts of DHA during development in the womb. This means eating 8 to 12 ounce servings of fish like salmon, trout, or sardines at least twice a week, but avoiding high-mercury fish like swordfish, shark, king mackerel, tilefish, and tuna.

It also means that next time you are choosing between the more expensive DHA milk or regular milk at the grocery store, it is probably safe to pass on the DHA one because it does not guarantee that your children will score higher on their I.Q. test. Instead, serve them some tasty fish at dinner.

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