

Are Fish Oil Supplements Safe? Industry Leaders Speak Out

Article by: Michael Macher | *Huffington Post* | Posted April 14, 2010

As trendy nutrition supplements continue their migration from fringe wellness markets to ever more profitable mainstream distributors, consumers and health organizations alike have begun questioning the health standards of some of the industry's most lucrative products.

Latest on the list? Fish oils.

A recent California lawsuit filed against five major distributors of fish oil pills has catapulted the popular omega-3 supplement to the center of public health discourse, with the debate hinging on the extent to which high levels of the compound contaminant polychlorinated biphenyl (PCB) and other impurities can be found in some of the most popular over-the-counter fish oil supplements.

A March 30 panel discussion -- held at Gusto Organics and moderated by nutrition expert Ashley Koff RD -- brought together industry leaders in Omega-3 fish oil manufacturing and distribution in order to ask crucial questions regarding the safety, sustainability and corporate transparency of fish oil supplements as they increase in popularity.

Nutritional Supplements Versus Pharmaceuticals

Joining the discussion were Chris Speed (Minami Inc.), Tom Newmark (New Chapter Inc.) and Joar Opheim (Nordic Naturals Inc.) -- three CEO's personally selected by Ms. Koff for their commitment to issues of safety, transparency and sustainability.

The panel opened with reflections on the eroding distinction between "nutrition supplements" and "pharmaceuticals" -- with each the panelists voicing different variations of the same conclusion: *there simply is no meaningful difference between the two.*

- Minami's Chris Speed claimed that fish oil supplements are "not foofy natural things," but are becoming recognized as "real pharmaceutical agents." However, he was quick to point out that "we're kidding ourselves if we think that something sitting in a box in a store is natural."
- New Chapter's Tom Newmark offered a strikingly different interpretation. "Our product *is* a whole food," Newmark emphasized, "not just a manipulation of fish molecules." Unlike Minami and Nordic Naturals, both of whom engage in multi-step purification processes, New Chapter's Omega-3 fish oil supplements rely exclusively on the "freshness of wild Alaskan salmon, research extensively for its purity and efficacy."
- Joar Opheim of Nordic Naturals stressed the extent to which the fish oil market has expanded since he first arrived in the US in the 80s as a gymnast. "I could not find any good fish oils when I came to the US as a gymnast," he said. "Now we know the benefits of omega-3."

It was Mr. Speed who perhaps summarized this change in perspective most concisely: "If a supplement offers a molecule instead of a natural food, it *is* a drug."

However, it should be noted that obscuring the boundaries between pharmaceuticals, supplements and foods is not necessarily a universal trend. For many doctors, such as David Katz of Yale's Prevention Research Center the quality of nutrients in nutrition supplements should not act as a substitute for whole foods. As he argues in his latest blog:

If we want optimal nutrients for healthy cells ... the source of nutrients may be crucial. The best source -- the source strongly and consistently associated with lower risk of just about every disease -- is wholesome foods. No supplement is a substitute for them.

Omega-3 Fish Oils: Benefits and Risks

The panelists were eager to dispel the myth that there is such a thing as a completely contaminant-free fish oil. "The unfortunate reality here is that there are trace amounts of contaminants in everything we consume regardless of the purification process," said Mr. Speed. "The real problem is not in the supplement itself, but rather in poor sourcing and/or purification practices."

This sentiment appears, at least on the face of things, to be true.

Indeed, one of the strongest cases for omega-3 comes from its benefits for cardiac health, as evidenced by a 2006 American Heart Association study introduced by Mr. Newmark, which concluded that Omega-3s help "those at high risk of ... cardiovascular disease." These claims have been echoed by the Federal Food and Drug Administration (FDA), which issued as early as 2004 a "qualified health claim for reduced risk of coronary heart disease (CHD) on conventional foods that contain eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA) and docosahexaenoic (DHA) omega-3 fatty acids."

Mr. Newmark added, "the AHA also tells us we are deficient in our servings of fish oil -- 80 percent of us are not getting what we need daily..."

Omega-3 has also been proven to be one of the strongest preventive medicines for chronic inflammation -- a leading cause of most chronic illnesses. Stuart Tomc, education director for Nordic Naturals, went as far as to claim -- though perhaps hyperbolically -- that "Omega-3 deficiency is one of the top killers in the world, and it's entirely preventable." He added, "correcting the Omega-3 deficiency may be the most important correction we can make."

Health benefits aside, there *are* major reasons for concern. Contaminants such as dioxins, heavy metals, PCBs, Mercury and lead can be strongly present in poorly processed fish oils. What's more, many fish oil manufacturers have been called out for high levels of oxidation, or rancidity -- significantly reducing the efficacy of the omega-3s.

"There is no consensus on this issue," voiced Minami's Chris Speed, " but it's not good enough when there are predominant brands with massive contaminants, just because it's cheap."

Conclusion: Increasing Transparency

One of the most important issues with regard to the future of the fish oil industry, and nutrition supplements more generally, is the idea of corporate transparency. With information technology changing the way consumers interact with health data, consumer advocacy has become a different game entirely.

We're becoming smarter, less credulous consumers. And we possess more agency now than ever before. As a consequence, there is increasing pressure for companies to provide critical health information to consumers -- including test results for potentially harmful contaminants.

But how do consumers know which supplements to trust?

Stuart Tomc of Nordic Naturals offered the following advice: "to know if a fish oil is clean, get a lab analysis from a third party. It needs to be on the web, we need proof. There are too many issues with freshness, heavy metals, dioxides."

Moderator Ashley Koff, RD voiced her support for independent, third party testing, saying: "Providing me with a third party certificate, I know a product is safe." She continued, "We need to know what's in our fish oils, but of equal importance is what's *not* in them. According to Mr. Speed, "consumers have a lot of legwork to do" when it comes to choosing the right supplements. "You've all got a big job ahead of you, because the consumer is part of holding companies accountable."

Looking forward, we can hope for more transparency, better purification methods and purer fishing sources. However, it is up to us do our homework and advocate for increased information sharing on the part of large pharmaceutical corporations.

###

(For a fish oil that has been tested by an independent third party, please visit www.CardioResults.com or www.Omega3zone.biz . This fish oil has been third party tested by IFOS. IFOS is internationally respected for it stringent fish oil analysis.)