

# The Vital Role of Essential Fatty Acids for Pregnant and Nursing Women

by John Finnegan



Recently it has been discovered that the Omega-3 fats are necessary for the complete development of the human brain during pregnancy and the first two years of life. The Omega-3 fat and its derivative, DHA (docosahexaenoic acid), is so essential to a child's development that if a mother and infant are deficient in it, the child's nervous system and immune system may never fully develop, and it can cause a lifetime of unexplained emotional, learning, and immune system disorders.

Considering the enormous increase in emotional, learning, and immune system disorders in our population today, one cannot help but wonder what effect this widespread nutritional deficiency is having on the breakdown in people's health.

One also wonders whether the prevalence of infant and childhood illnesses like Epstein Barr; Candida albicans overgrowth; sinus allergies; chronic ear, nose, and throat infections; as well as so-called emotional disorders like hyperactivity and autistic behavior, also have their basis in nutritional deficiencies, particularly in the lack of Omega-3 fatty acids.

Further compounding the problem, an estimated 60-70% of all two-month-old babies are bottle-fed, and 75-80% of all four-month-old babies are bottle-fed; none of the powdered baby formulas such as Isomil, Similac, Gerber, and Carnation contain Omega-3 fatty acids.(1) To my knowledge, all baby formulas are made with commercially processed oils which contain high levels of poisonous trans fatty acids and other harmful compounds.(2)

Dr. Donald Rudin, in his excellent book *The Omega-3 Phenomenon*, states the issue succinctly: There is no comparable substitute for the remarkable mix of nutrients and immunity-boosting factors provided by mother's milk, as long as the mother is eating properly. A well-nourished nursing mother provides her infant with a perfect blend of essential fatty acids and their long-chained derivatives, assuring the fast-growing brain and body tissues a rich supply. Mother's milk also supplies important antibodies not present in cow's milk or in artificial formula. Here is a nutritive comparison:

Breast milk may have five times more arachidonic acid and two and a half times more EPA (eicosapentaenoic acid) than formula. Breast milk may have 30 times more DHA (docosahexaenoic acid) than formula. Compared with mother's milk, formulas are also low in selenium and biotin. Sadly, the breast milk of many mothers in our country reflects the *high trans fatty acid* and *low Omega-3 content* in the average diet. American mothers produce milk that often has only one-fifth to one-tenth of the Omega-3 content of the milk that well-nourished, nut-eating Nigerian mothers provide their infants.

This discovery has far-reaching implications. A study in March, 1991, at the Mayo Clinic of 19 'normal' pregnant women consuming normal diets indicated all were deficient in the Omega-3 fats, and to a lesser degree, Omega-6 fats.(3) Another study of Inuit (Eskimo) women, compared to Canadian women, revealed the same deficiencies in the milk of Canadian nursing mothers.(4)

Compounding the problem is our nation's pervasive obsession with weight loss programs, which induce women to avoid all fats. The frightening news is that for the past three generations (since the advent of refined oils), the vast majority of the population in North America has not been given adequate nourishment for complete brain development.

The part of the brain that Omega-3 affects is the learning ability, anxiety/depression, and auditory and visual perception. The Omega-3 fats also aid in balancing the autoimmune system, and there seem to be a growing number of children with allergies, colic, and skin problems.

There are also indications that Omega-3 fats play an ongoing role in brain function, healthy immune system function, and general growth throughout childhood and adolescence. One study revealed that Omega-3 supplementation induced catch-up growth in a deficient, underdeveloped seven-year-old.(5)

Since our mental apparatus is developed in the mother's womb and during the first two years of life, one would be wise to heed the advice of the researchers from the Mayo Clinic study. (6) They suggest that this important fat be supplemented in every pregnancy, and that refined and hydrogenated fats be avoided during this critical period.

For these conservative researchers to include a message like this in their research paper should make us concerned for our future. I have personal experience with families who have had 'flax' babies. These children (now 3 and 6 years old) are very bright and healthy and have been free from many health problems most young children now experience.

A deficiency of the Omega-3 and Omega-6 fats causes insufficient milk production and breast engorgement. Flax seed oil has been found to substantially increase milk production in women who are not producing enough milk to nurse their infants. It also often clears up breast engorgement. One woman was having great difficulty producing enough milk to nurse her newborn child. Within twenty-four hours of taking flax seed oil, her milk production doubled, and one breast that was engorged opened up, allowing the milk to flow freely.

Many authorities recommend that pregnant and nursing women consume fatty fish two to three times weekly and/or add a minimal amount of flax seed oil to their diets to insure adequate intake of Omega-6 and Omega-3 fatty acids.

Another paper worth reading is the report given by Artemis Simopoulos, M.D., a pediatrician and endocrinologist from the International Life Sciences Institute.(7) She takes a comprehensive look at how the Omega-3 deficiency affects many areas, from fetal growth to arthritis and cancer.

A healthy mother's milk is high in essential fatty acids, GLA, and other precursors to prostaglandins. Cow's milk is low in essential fatty acids, and other prostaglandin precursors, and is high in saturated fats. For this reason, cow's milk is not an adequate substitute for mother's milk. Neither is baby formula. At a recent international symposium on Dietary Omega-3 and 6 Fatty Acids Dr. Neuringer, an authority on infant milk, stated that the low Omega-3, high Omega-6 content in infant formulas is of great concern because of the imbalance it causes among the resultant prostaglandins. These imbalances could impair the immune system and predispose the infant to cancer and heart trouble later in life. Feeding a non-nursing baby a few drops of flax seed oil will provide the Omega-3 and Omega-6 essential fatty acids.

The Health Protection Branch of the Canadian government, which is the equivalent of the American FDA, is considering requiring that all infant formulas contain adequate amounts of the Omega-3 fatty acids.

**Note:** Since most adults today are deficient in the Omega-3 fatty acids, nursing mothers may not have sufficient amounts to pass along to their infants.

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### **Generational Consequences of Deficiency**

There are many serious consequences of generation after generation having diets deficient in an element essential for normal development of the nervous system. Following are a few observations of the effects that inadequate nutrition is having on social and economic conditions today.

- A widespread alienation and pervasive depression in young people, truly alarming to observe in an age group usually known for its boundless enthusiasm and enjoyment of life.
- An increase in suicides and killings among young children, almost unheard of a generation ago.
- The ongoing increase in drug and alcohol abuse.
- An unparalleled growth of immune system disorders like Epstein Barr, Candida, allergies, chronic sinus and ear infections, and digestive disorders.
- A serious decline in the level of scholastic achievement among school children.
- A continued deterioration of the quality of goods produced by American industries. (A nation of people that lives on hamburgers, french fries, milk shakes, cola drinks, TV dinners, and other toxic foods is destined to lose its competitive edge, and will continue to foster drug abuse in the workplace.)

Certainly, there are many social and economic factors contributing to this disturbing state. But there is also a great deal of sound scientific research that clearly demonstrates that, when populations are subjected to serious, continued nutritional deficiencies, the offspring of each successive generation shows an increased deterioration in physical and mental health.(8-13) I have spoken with many older doctors who have told me that they find most people in their fifties and sixties to be constitutionally stronger and healthier than those of the next generation, in their thirties and forties.

In his classic work, *Nutrition and Physical Degeneration*, Dr. Weston Price presents remarkable observations on the diets and health of different cultures around the world. He has extensively documented the degeneration that occurs when healthy peoples, eating traditional diets, convert to modern foods.

Weston Price's time in history was unique. He was able to observe many cultures, living and eating as they had for thousands of years. When these people met the modern age and converted to modern diets, they experienced disastrous consequences to their physical and emotional health.

He studied society after society, from Swiss farmers living in high Alpine valleys to Gaelics on islands of the outer Hebrides, from descendants of ancient civilizations living in Peru to the Maori in New Zealand, the Eskimos in Alaska, Indians in Canada and the United States, Melanesians and Polynesians in the South Pacific, Africans and Malay tribes on islands north of Australia. Again and again, he found the same story repeated. The indigenous peoples had strong, healthy bodies, free from cancer, heart disease, and immune system weakness. And surprisingly, tooth decay and cavities were almost nonexistent, despite the fact that these peoples usually had no dentists or fluoride toothpaste.(14-15)

He saw, firsthand, how each succeeding generation that converted their diets to modern, refined foods experienced a continued deterioration in health. He also met several doctors who told him that, in several decades of living among native peoples, they never saw a single case of cancer.

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