

Omega-3 least known of pregnancy "Big 3" by Clarisse Douauq

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9/18/2006 -- Only 41 percent of mothers and expectant mothers know they should be consuming omega-3 fatty acids during pregnancy, according to a recent survey, emphasizing a need for more education as well as an untapped market.

The Washington, DC-based Society for Women's Health Research (SWHR) conducted a public opinion survey involving 500 American women aged 18 and older who were either pregnant, nursing or had children aged three and under. Questions were put to the women regarding the "Big 3" of pregnancy nutrition: *folic acid*, *calcium* with vitamin D and omega-3 fatty acids.

The finding that women are less aware of the need for omega-3, compared with other nutrients for healthy mothers and babies, implying formulators' omega-3 message has still not saturated the prenatal market.

A diet rich in the DHA omega-3 fatty acid (docosahexaenoic acid) during pregnancy and breastfeeding is thought to support healthy pregnancies as well as the mental and visual development of infants. Mothers are said to be less at risk of post partum depression or mood change, and to recover more quickly after pregnancy, if they consume enough of the fatty acid.

Still, women are much more aware of folic acid and calcium with vitamin D in pregnancy than they are of omega-3. Eighty-seven percent knew the importance of folic acid and 58 percent were aware of the benefits of calcium with vitamin D.

"Folic acid, calcium with vitamin D and DHA omega-3 -- together, they make up the Big 3 essential nutrients that are important before, during and after pregnancy," said SWHR president and CEO Phyllis Greenberger. "Fortunately, by paying attention to what they eat women can easily obtain these nutrients through a balanced diet, fortified foods and supplement's."

And women 'in the know' are eager to purchase DHA fortified foods rather than eat fish, according to the survey. After being informed that pregnant women are advised to avoid fish because it may contain mercury, 88 percent of survey respondents said they would be interested in purchasing a product that would help them get DHA without having to eat fish.

The survey also determined the women's preferred food vehicles for DHA if they had a choice. Cereal and cereal bars were most popular at 39 percent; followed by orange juice at 34 percent; and pasta at 25 percent.

SWHR's survey was funded in part by Martek Biosciences, which stands to benefit from increased knowledge on the natal benefits of DHA - as well as to lose if fish-sourced DHA makes its way into infant foods. Martek claims its algae-sourced DHA and ARA

(arachidonic acid) are the omega-3 fortifying ingredients in 83 to 86 percent of fortified infant formulas in the US.

Up until February 2006, the US Food & Drug Administration only approved vegetarian sources of DHA for use in infant formulas. When the agency expanded its approval to non-vegetarian sources.

The survey is clear in its support for algae-derived DHA:

"Women should check nutrition labels and ask their grocers and health care providers what foods contain algal-based sources of DHA," says the SWHR.

Market researcher Mintel has identified omega-3 fortification as one of the major trends for 2006.

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