

Monthly Newsletter for Woodlands' CCM Program



Should I take a fish oil supplement?

By Mark M. Ryan MD

Learn why fish oil supplements may not provide the cardiovascular benefits you expect.

About one in five adults above the age of 60 [takes](#) a fish oil supplement, often due to a [belief](#) that fish oil provides general health or a cardiovascular benefit. This belief dates back to the 1970s when dietary [studies](#) described favorable lipid profiles and lower levels of heart disease in populations that consumed more [fish](#) and less saturated fat. Since that time, there has been considerable interest and effort in determining whether a fish oil supplement can achieve the same cardiovascular benefits as whole fish consumption.

Unfortunately, data from [clinical trials](#) consistently shows that the majority of patients derive no benefit from fish oil supplementation. Furthermore, a recent [meta-analysis](#) of data showed that high doses of over-the-counter fish oil supplements increases risk of atrial fibrillation. For this reason, the American College of Cardiology and American Heart Association recommend against the routine use of over-the-counter fish oil supplements.

There are two exceptions: individuals with very high triglycerides (>500mg/dl), and individuals with high triglycerides and diabetes or a history of heart attack or stroke. In these specific patient populations, taking a high dose of purified EPA-type omega 3 (Vascepa or icosapent ethyl) results in lower risk of heart disease.

For patients, navigating health claims made by the manufacturers of fish oil supplements can be very challenging. Despite the FDA's responsibility to regulate health claims made by supplement manufacturers, a recent [study](#) found that only a quarter of fish oil supplements used FDA approved language that captures the uncertainty and lack of scientific consensus surrounding any benefit of fish oil. See if you can guess which of the following health claims about fish oil supplements uses FDA-approved language:

- Research shows that consuming EPA and DHA combined may be beneficial for moderating blood pressure, a risk factor for CHD (coronary heart disease). However, FDA has concluded that the evidence is inconsistent and inconclusive.
- Promotes Heart & Vascular Health. May Reduce Risk of Coronary Heart Disease. Supports Heart & Immune Health.

The manufacturer who listed the claims in the second bullet point on their fish oil supplement recently [settled](#) a class-action lawsuit for false advertising.

You will want to check with your doctor first, but for the majority of patients, I recommend against taking a fish oil supplement as a way to lower risk of heart disease. Rather, I suggest that they pursue ways to increase dietary intake of beneficial omega 3s, regular exercise, and taking prescription medications when necessary.

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>>> IN THE NEWS

I have COVID-19. Do I need to take Paxlovid?

A newly published study shows that patients at average risk for progression to severe COVID-19 do not benefit by taking Paxlovid.

The initial clinical trial of Paxlovid in 2022 compared symptomatic, unvaccinated, non hospitalized adults at high risk for progression to severe COVID-19 (read: hospitalization or death) to receive either Paxlovid or placebo for five days. This study showed that among unvaccinated, high risk patients treatment of COVID-19 with Paxlovid resulted in 89% lower risk of hospitalization and death compared to placebo.

After this 2022 clinical trial was published, the U.S. National Institutes of Health began recommending Paxlovid as first-line therapy for outpatients with COVID-19 who were at high risk for progression to severe disease. It was never clear whether patients without any risk factors for progression to severe disease, i.e. “standard risk” patients, benefited from treatment with Paxlovid or not.

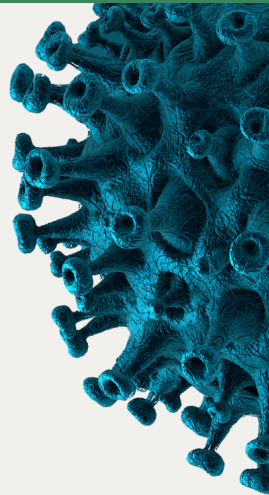
In the EPIC-SR study published this month and sponsored by Pfizer (the company that manufactures Paxlovid), researchers randomized 1300 patients with a median age of 42 and either unvaccinated without any risk factors or vaccinated with only one risk factor for progression to severe COVID-19 to receive five days of Paxlovid or placebo.

They then measured the time to sustained alleviation of all symptoms as well as any COVID-related hospitalization or death from any cause. The time to sustained alleviation of all signs and symptoms of COVID-19, hospitalization, or death did not differ significantly between patients who received Paxlovid and those who received placebo.

These results are significant for several reasons:

- Pfizer published what is referred to as “negative data”. This study adds tremendously to the practice of evidence-based medicine and sound medical advice, but it is not likely to add to Pfizer’s quarterly earnings. Kudos to them for publishing the results nonetheless.
- There was no harm to taking Paxlovid. Despite the medication interactions and significant side effects people report from Paxlovid, the frequency of adverse events patients reported in the Paxlovid and placebo groups was equal.
- We are now at a point where we can evaluate the effect of not treating COVID-19 in certain patients. This is an incredible achievement given the degree of death and hopelessness we have witnessed COVID-19 cause in the past four years.

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APRIL IS Stress Awareness Month

Effectively managing stress is a crucial skill for maintaining good health.

Simply put, stress can kill.

Patients with high levels of chronic stress are more likely to die of heart disease or stroke. If you are feeling overwhelmed, try these [ways](#) to decrease stress in your life:

- Get out of the house by taking a walk to receive sunlight and see and hear nature
- Improve sleep by setting a regular bedtime and wakeup routine that includes turning off or dimming electronic devices two hours before bedtime
- Ensure regular physical activity with a goal of 150 minutes of light or moderate exercise a week



Call Us First 

Traveling for the weekend and experiencing a terrible migraine with nausea and vomiting?

Our physicians are on-call 24/7 and available to assess the severity of your symptoms and advise you on whether or not you need to go to the emergency room or to a nearby pharmacy to pick-up medications we can prescribe to alleviate your symptoms. We want you to receive the best care in the most appropriate setting.

Call [850-696-4000](tel:850-696-4000) and ask the operator for the Woodlands primary care physician on-call prior to going to the emergency room.

