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Fish oil pills don't improve children's intellect

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The findings, published in the American Journal of Clinical Nutrition, support the results of an earlier Norwegian study that also found no differences in IQ among seven-year-olds whose mothers did or did not take fish oil supplements while pregnant and breastfeeding.
- AP Photo

NEW YORK: There is some evidence that taking fish oil pills during pregnancy can help children's brain development, but a Spanish study suggests that the supplements make no difference in measures of intellect when the children are six years old.

The findings, published in the American Journal of Clinical Nutrition, support the results of an earlier Norwegian study that also found no differences in IQ among seven-year-olds whose mothers did or did not take fish oil supplements while pregnant and breastfeeding.

Fatty acids, such as docosahexaenoic acid (DHA), that are found in fish and other foods, are considered to be important for the developing fetus. The question has been whether adding more of these fats to mothers' diets through supplements will further benefit the baby.

The researchers did find, though, that the children of women who had high levels of DHA in their red blood cells around the time they gave birth scored above average on the intelligence tests at age six.

"We observed no significant effect of supplementation on the cognitive function of children, but maternal DHA status may be related to later cognitive function in children," wrote Cristina Campoy at the University of Granada in Spain, who led the study.

The mothers with high DHA in their red blood cells were not necessarily given fish oil supplements — rather, the result could reflect mothers' intake of DHA from various sources

over a longer period of time.

This could mean that long term fatty acid intake “is more beneficial than receiving supplementation alone during pregnancy,” the researchers wrote.

The current study did not measure the diets of the children, something that could have influenced the results, said Ingrid Helland at Oslo University Hospital, who led the earlier Norwegian research.

“It might be that subtle beneficial effects of (prenatal fish oil) supplementation are being overshadowed by other factors (genetics, social stimulation, nutrition etc),” Helland wrote in an email to Reuters Health.

But she is not totally abandoning the idea that taking fish oil might be beneficial.

“If a friend would ask me if she should take supplements or not, I would recommend supplementation, but emphasize that we still do not have any scientific proof that it benefits the child,” she added.

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