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## Fish oil pills: Swimming into dangerous waters

There are health benefits, and health risks, in consuming fish oil. **Pooja Vig** and **Shefali Srivinas** learn more.

**N**utritional supplements made from fish oil are popular among people who want to reduce their risk of heart disease. In fact, the United States alone has seen their sales rise from \$1.5 billion in 1994 to \$1.5 billion in 2004. Yet several studies have shown that some fish oil supplements can contain levels of environmental pollutants such as dioxins and heavy metals that are as high as those found in some fish.

The Health Sciences Authority (HSA) in Singapore alerted the public to the problem last year when it found that the products did not meet the standards for dioxin and heavy metal levels set by the European Union. The HSA also found that some fish oil supplements contained levels of dioxin and heavy metal that were as high as those found in some fish.

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### The best and worst

**F**ish oil is a high protein, low fat food rich in omega-3 fatty acids. It is usually taken in the form of capsules or tablets. It is used to reduce the risk of heart disease, lower blood pressure, and improve vision. It is also used to reduce the risk of cancer, improve skin health, and reduce the risk of Alzheimer's disease.

The HSA group, known as the HSA Group, has issued a list of the best and worst fish oil supplements. The best are those that are made from wild-caught fish and are free of contaminants. The worst are those that are made from farmed fish and contain high levels of contaminants.

The levels of these components, which are thought to damage the body's natural defenses, are highest in farmed fish and fish from Europe. Mercury contamination has been found in some fish oil supplements. The HSA group has issued a list of the best and worst fish oil supplements. The best are those that are made from wild-caught fish and are free of contaminants. The worst are those that are made from farmed fish and contain high levels of contaminants.

### Which brand to go for?

Environmental Defense, a leading United States non-profit organization, has been analyzing fish and fish oil supplements since 1987. It has compiled a report on 75 brands of fish oil supplements across the world and rated them according to purity.



**Nordic Naturals Omega 3 Lemons (1,000mg)**  
Price: \$20.95 for 30 soft gels  
**Nordic Naturals Arctic Cod Liver Oil (237mg)**  
Price: \$29.95  
Where to Buy: Vitacost, 183 Orchard Road, #01-20/21, #02, #03, #04, #05, #06, #07, #08, #09, #10, #11, #12, #13, #14, #15, #16, #17, #18, #19, #20, #21, #22, #23, #24, #25, #26, #27, #28, #29, #30, #31, #32, #33, #34, #35, #36, #37, #38, #39, #40, #41, #42, #43, #44, #45, #46, #47, #48, #49, #50, #51, #52, #53, #54, #55, #56, #57, #58, #59, #60, #61, #62, #63, #64, #65, #66, #67, #68, #69, #70, #71, #72, #73, #74, #75, #76, #77, #78, #79, #80, #81, #82, #83, #84, #85, #86, #87, #88, #89, #90, #91, #92, #93, #94, #95, #96, #97, #98, #99, #100, #101, #102, #103, #104, #105, #106, #107, #108, #109, #110, #111, #112, #113, #114, #115, #116, #117, #118, #119, #120, #121, #122, #123, #124, #125, #126, #127, #128, #129, #130, #131, #132, #133, #134, #135, #136, #137, #138, #139, #140, #141, #142, #143, #144, #145, #146, #147, #148, #149, #150, #151, #152, #153, #154, #155, #156, #157, #158, #159, #160, #161, #162, #163, #164, #165, #166, #167, #168, #169, #170, #171, #172, #173, #174, #175, 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**Shaklee Omega 3 Complex**  
Price: \$45.00 for 30 capsules  
Where to Buy: Guardian Pharmacy outlets

**Usana Bio-Omega 3**  
Price: \$45.00 for 30 capsules  
Where to Buy: Independent Usana Distributors. For more information, call 800-858-8838

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## Making the right choices



Fish oil supplements line the shelves at the Unity NTUC Healthcare outlet in Great World City. The range available reflects the jump in consumer interest.

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most of their omega-3 fatty acids from eating fish rather than from pills.

"Only for those with high triglyceride levels, adding a fish oil supplement may be beneficial in reducing the levels," she said.

Triglycerides are the chemical form in which fat exists in the body. High levels increase the risk of hypertension, diabetes and heart disease. This is because a single fish oil capsule contains about 30 times the amount of omega-3 fatty acids as a single fish portion. On average, a 115g serving of oily fish contains about 1.5g of omega-3 fatty acids.

One advantage of supplements is that unlike fish, fish oil can be purified. Most regulators stipulate a level of purity but standards vary considerably. The European Union standards are among the strictest, being more cautious than those imposed by the US FDA.

Environmental Defense, a US non-profit organisation, has conducted an international study of fish and fish

oil supplements. The group helps consumers decide how to obtain adequate amounts of omega-3 fatty acids without the accompanying contaminants.

Only three of the fish oil supplement brands available in Singapore are featured on the list of "Best Choice" supplements. These brands are Nordic Naturals, which is made in Norway, and Shaklee and Usana brands, which are made in the US.

All three brands certify that their supplements are free from heavy metals, dioxins, and PCBs. While other supplements on the market may also be of a good quality, they do not offer this assurance of purity.

While there is one new benefit after the other of consuming fish oil, getting a safe and reliable supply of the fat is a challenge. Future plans include using genetic engineering techniques to create enough supply of these fatty acids, without relying on marine sources.

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Pooja Vig writes on nutritional matters for Mind Your Body.

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