



Fish oil is no snake oil

Mark Twain once advised everyone to swallow a frog each morning, so that afterward they could bask in the comforting knowledge that the worst part of their day was over. Growing up in my family in the 1940s, however, it wasn't a frog, but a teaspoonful of cod-liver oil, which was foul enough, along with an assortment of large, ghastly vitamin pills. Having nevertheless survived into my seventh decade, I have reluctantly concluded that it could not have been all bad. Now we are told that it was probably good.

Although it may seem counterintuitive that any fat ingestion could be beneficial to the circulatory system, on page 208 in this issue of the *Journal* Dr. William S. Harris reminds us that oils containing long-chain omega-3 fatty acids have been shown to prevent ischemic heart disease among other things. Like the snake oil of fable, they are also good for rheumatism, inflammatory bowel disease, Alzheimer disease, and prostate cancer, and probably many other afflictions as well. The main sources of these fatty acids are "oily" fish, and you have to eat a lot of fish to get maximum benefit.

Dr. Harris points out that it really isn't clear how these miraculous effects come about. Theories about inhibition of arachidonic acid formation and inhibition of L-type calcium channels have not proven to be entirely satisfactory. But why look a gift horse (or a cold fish) in the mouth? It works and it's safe. If the only price to pay is the occasional fishy burp, I'd say go with it.

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P.S. Beginning this month, our CME tests will be available online for 6 months instead of 3. (The January and February tests will still expire at 3 months.) This change means you'll have to make one extra mouse-click to access a list of available CME tests.