

Should I be adding fish oil to my dog's food?

Fish oil contains fatty acids that are needed for a healthy diet for dogs. There are various types of fatty acids based on their chemical structure. Omega-6 and omega-3 fatty acids are considered essential fatty acids as they cannot be produced by the body to any extent. They must be taken in by diet or supplements. Fatty acids are present in plants also, but are only minimally metabolized by dogs. The best source is cold water fatty fish such as sardines, halibut, salmon and herring. In general omega-3 fatty acids are considered anti-inflammatory and omega-6 fatty acids have pro-inflammatory properties. This is the reasoning behind using omega-3 fatty acids to reduce inflammation in arthritic animals, and help with skin conditions, kidney disease and possibly cancer. Excessive levels of omega-6 may worsen inflammatory diseases. The ratio of omega-6 to omega-3 in the diet is critical for the best effect. The ideal ratio is close to 5:1. Since normally a dog's diet is high in omega-6, by adding only omega-3, the ratio can be achieved.

A problem with selecting these or other nutritional supplements is what brand to buy. Here is where some education and the help of your veterinarian are beneficial. Unfortunately there are no government regulations that oversee the production of nutritional supplements. We have to rely on the company that manufactures the product to be reputable. Studies have been published that find wide disparity between the analysis of ingredients by independent laboratories and the label of the package. The two specific omega-3 fatty acids to look for on the ingredient label are DHA and EPA. Rancidity and mercury content are also potential concerns with fish oil products.

There are commercial foods designed to help dogs with allergic skin disease, which are formulated with the ideal ratio of omega-6 to omega-3 fatty acids. Your veterinarian can help you select one of these food as an alternative to giving capsules or liquids if she feels your pet would benefit from an adjustment in its fatty acid intake.

Research on the benefits and hazards of nutritional supplements, including essential fatty acids continues to shed new light on the subject. Recent studies in people have been published suggesting that the long-believed benefits of fish oil regarding heart disease and cancer prevention may be inaccurate. Dietary recommendations are always changing in human nutrition as well as veterinary nutrition as we learn more. Discuss the use of any supplements with your veterinarian.

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