

OMEGA-3 FATTY ACIDS: WHAT'S THE RIGHT AMOUNT FOR YOUR DOG?



On January 1, 1998, AAFCO began allowing omega-3 and -6 fatty acid information on pet food bags. But how much omega-3 and omega-6 is then enough or too much for your dog?

Let's get some definitions first.

Fatty acids are fats, but with a certain chemical structure. Linoleic acid is the one fatty acid that is essential in a dog's diet - the dog doesn't make its own. Linoleic acid is an omega-6.

Omega-3 corrects many dry skin problems and has been reported to decrease arthritic stiffness. People have reported that it gives them and their dogs more energy. Omega-3 comes from both vegetable and animal sources such - from fish, flax, grass and leaves.

According to a new book, *The Omega Plan* by Artemis Simopoulos, M.D., the supply of omega-3 in humans' and pets' diets has decreased 80% in the last 100 years, whereas the omega-6 supply has increased 300%. She found that eating a balanced diet, including the right fats, is the key to good health and longevity for animals and humans. Getting enough omega-3 fats is the key, she says.

Omega-3 and omega-6 compete with each other in the metabolic machinery of mammals. Excess levels of omega-6 lead to inflammation-type diseases: arthritis, cancer, heart trouble, atopy (itching) and many other degenerative diseases.

So, what are the optimal levels of omega-6 and omega-3?

Most of the answers we have today are based on experiments with rats. However, most laboratory rats don't live long enough to develop degenerative diseases. Therefore, we have to look to the long-living human population to find the best answers about the ideal ratio of omega-6 to omega-3.

According to Dr. William Lands, the leading omega-3 and omega-6 researcher in the U.S., the ideal level of omega-6 (based on the longest-living, healthiest people on earth) is 1% of the diet (by weight of the diet). That works out to 5 grams of omega-6 per pound of dog food. This happens to be the same level AAFCO started recommending several years ago. Based on Land's studies and most other fatty acid research with monkeys, rats, mice and people, 1% is enough and not too much omega-6 for all mammals. Nearly all the studies show that higher levels of omega-6 lead to a greasy coat and higher risk for cancer, arthritis and inflammatory diseases of all types.

Because the body uses the same pathways to metabolize both omega-6 and omega-3 fatty acids, finding the ideal ratio of the two types of fatty acids is important. Since too much omega-6 inhibits the metabolism of omega-3, the search is on for the right balance. Based on research with dogs, Iams Company researcher Dr. Greg Reinhart recommends a ratio of omega-6 to omega-3 ranging between 5 to 1 and 10 to 1. Researcher Doug Bibus of the University of Minnesota recently completed a study with dogs. He suggests a lower ratio: between 2 to 1 and 4 to 1.

You can estimate the fatty acid content by looking at total fat and omega-6 (linoleic) content. If the dominating ingredients are corn or corn germ and poultry fat or vegetable oil, you can be sure that the dog food contains mostly omega-6. Corn oil has a 60 to 1 ratio of omega-6 to omega-3, poultry fat has a 20 to 1 ratio. Those foods need to be balanced out. You can add about 1 tablespoon of stabilized flax/vegetable oil or 1 teaspoon of fish oil to each pound of dog food.

Beware of lipid (fat) supplements, too - many of them are loaded with omega-6 and not very much omega-3. Better to stick with whole high Omega 3 oils like flax seed mixed oils or fresh fish.