

Linoleic Acid (Evening Primrose Oil)

Linoleic acid, which is a major component of evening primrose oil, and is also found in sunflower seeds and safflower oils, is a dietary supplement of polyunsaturated fatty acids (PUFA). Because such fatty acids are an element of myelin, the coating around nerve fibers in the central nervous system that are damaged in MS, studies have been conducted to see if taking an oral supplement might alter the course of multiple sclerosis.

There have been three randomized, blinded, placebo-controlled trials of linoleic acid supplements in people with relapsing MS. Two of these studies showed limited positive outcomes and one study found no benefit. When the data from the three studies were combined for further analysis, linoleic acid was found to slow the progression of disability in individuals who had little or no disability at the start of treatment. It was not found to slow progression in people with higher levels of disability. For everyone in the study, linoleic acid was associated with reduced length and severity of attacks. However, because the statistical methods used to analyze the combined data have been called into question, no firm conclusions can be drawn.

On the basis of studies conducted to date, a positive effect exists, but it is a very modest one. Linoleic acid is available in the oils of seeds and nuts (e.g., safflower oil, sunflower oil, and sesame seed oil). It is also contained in the seeds and nuts themselves.

Risks Associated with Linoleic Acid

Linoleic acid has been shown to increase the risk of cancer in animals; no risk thus far has been found for humans. It may cause diarrhea in some people. The possible adverse effects of long-term supplementation with linoleic acid are unknown.

See also...

Sourcebook

- Complementary and Alternative Therapies
- Diets
- Vitamin Therapy

Society Web Resources

- Spotlight: Complementary & Alternative Medicine (CAM)
www.nationalmssociety.org/CAM
- Healthy Living with MS
www.nationalmssociety.org/Healthy

Clinical Bulletin for Healthcare Professionals

- Complementary and Alternative Medicine in MS
www.nationalmssociety.org/ClinicalBulletins

Books

Bowling A. *Alternative Medicine and Multiple Sclerosis*. New York: Demos Medical Publishing, 2001.

—Diets and Fatty Acid Supplements

Kalb R (ed.) *Multiple Sclerosis: A Guide for Families* (3rd ed.). New York: Demos Medical Publishing, 2005.

—Ch. 11 General Health and Well-Being

Schapiro R. *Managing the Symptoms of Multiple Sclerosis* (4th ed.). New York: Demos Medical Publishing, 2005.

—Ch. 19 Diet and Nutrition

The National Multiple Sclerosis Society is proud to be a source of information about multiple sclerosis. Our comments are based on professional advice, published experience, and expert opinion, but do not represent individual therapeutic recommendations or prescription. For specific information and advice, consult your personal physician.

To contact your chapter, call **1-800-FIGHT-MS** (1-800-344-4867) or visit the National MS Society web site: www.nationalmssociety.org.

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