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DHA: A nutrient that supports brain development

It's fitting that the full name of the nutrient DHA—docosahexaenoic acid—is long, considering that this special fatty acid offers benefits to a growing child.

Research has shown that a steady supply of DHA during the first year of life, from either breast milk or fortified formula, strengthens basic brain structures to support developmental milestones. Here's how DHA can benefit your baby, according to research.

Improved visual acuity

A 1998 study showed that babies who consumed DHA during the first 4 months of life had better vision scores on their first birthday than those who consumed no DHA. The retina of the eye is especially reliant on this fatty acid while vision is developing in the first weeks of life. A 2005 study found that babies who got DHA from either breast milk or formula performed the equivalent of one line better on a standard eye chart at 12 months if they received DHA for 36 weeks and one and a half lines better if they received DHA for the full 52 weeks.

Improved verbal skills

The visual and cognitive advantages due to DHA last well beyond infancy. In 2007, researchers reported in the journal *Early Human Development* that children who had received no DHA in formula or breast milk during the first 17 weeks of life had poorer visual acuity at age 4, and poorer scores on language tests showing verbal IQ, than those who were fed breast milk. Infants fed formula that had DHA and ARA (arachidonic acid) scored similarly to breastfed infants on these tests.

Having strong verbal skills—starting with understanding the spoken word and developing a wide vocabulary—may predict future school success.

Improved attention

Vision influences attention—the ability to focus and concentrate—which is considered foundational to learning. When University of Kansas researchers looked at babies who consumed varying amounts of formula that had DHA from birth through 4 months, 6 months, and 9 months of age, they found improved attention skills through 9 months compared with same-age babies who received no DHA. These findings, reported in *Pediatric Research* in 2011, indicated that DHA continues to offer cognitive support throughout the first year of life.



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Improved mental development

In a study published in 2000, researchers tested a range of mental development skills in a group of 18-month-olds. Those who had received DHA during the first 4 months of life and had been shown to have better visual acuity at 4 months were also found to have better scores on the Bayley Scales of Infant Development—a standardized assessment of motor, language, and cognitive development of infants and toddlers—compared with infants who didn't receive DHA. The toddlers who had consumed DHA as infants scored 7 points higher on the mental-development portion of the Bayley (average score is 100), which looks at such cognitive skills as memory, problem-solving, and classifying, along with social and language skills.

Improved executive function

As children move into the preschool and school years, educators know that the ability to pay attention and respond directly affects learning. A study reported in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* in 2013 found that babies who had been fed DHA (compared with those who had not) showed better performance on intelligence and language tests at ages 3 to 6 years. The tests used are considered to be indicators of school readiness

According to the researchers, skills that relied on a strong attention system advanced the most. These are the kinds of skills that make up what's known as executive function—the ability to use self-control, focus, goal-setting, and memory, among other abilities, to achieve.



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