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breaking news

Fish oil for mums may cut asthma in kids

DECEMBER 29, 2016 11:48AM

Belinda Tasker, Australian Associated Press

Taking fish oil supplements during pregnancy can help mums reduce their child's chances of developing asthma during the first five years of life, medical researchers have discovered.

A study of 695 newborns in Denmark found that the risk of developing asthma or a persistent wheeze dropped by a third among children whose mums took daily fish oil supplements during their third trimester of pregnancy.

The children also had a reduced risk of developing lower respiratory tract infections such as bronchitis and pneumonia, the researchers from the Copenhagen Prospective Studies on Asthma in Childhood said.

One in 10 Australians are estimated to have asthma and most children with the long-term lung condition have symptoms before their fifth birthday.

The Danish researchers said their findings, published in The New England Journal of Medicine on Thursday, could have wide implications for people with asthma around the world.

However, they noted that the intake of omega-3 polyunsaturated fatty acids like those found in cold water fish was high among the Danish women who took part in the study compared with those in many other countries.

"Our data therefore suggest that a sizeable effect may be expected from supplementation in other populations worldwide; however, this suggestion is speculative, since other factors may be at play in such populations," they wrote.

For the study the researchers gave about 700 mums either daily capsules containing 2.4g of two types of omega-3 fatty acids found in fish oil - 10 times the normal daily intake in Denmark and 20 times that in most other countries - or placebo capsules of olive oil.

The women began taking the capsules when they were 24 weeks pregnant and until their babies were a week old.

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The children were regularly monitored for any signs of wheezing, asthma, lower respiratory tract infections and skin conditions until they were five.

Among the children whose mothers took the fish oil supplements, 17 per cent developed a persistent wheeze or asthma by the time they turned five compared with 24 per cent whose mums had the alternative capsules.

The researchers said the results equated to a 30 per cent relative reduction in the risk of developing asthma for children whose mums took the fish oil.

The effects were strongest among children whose mums had had low levels of omega-3 fatty acids before they started taking the fish oil supplements.

The researchers noted that the incidence of asthma and wheezing disorders has more than doubled in western countries in recent decades.

At the same time, our intake of omega-6 polyunsaturated fatty acids has increased, thanks to a higher use of vegetable oils in cooking, while the intake of omega-3 has dropped.

Both types of fatty acids have been dubbed "essential" fatty acids because they are mostly obtained from food and cannot be produced by the human body.

ASTHMA IN AUSTRALIA:

- * One in 10 Australians have asthma
- * It is more common in boys aged up to 14 and females over 15
- * Rates among indigenous Australians are almost twice that for non-indigenous Australians
- * Asthma caused the deaths of 421 Australians in 2015 (278 were women)
- * Adults can develop asthma at any age, even if they did not have it as a child
- * Some people have asthma during childhood, but as adults have few or no symptoms
- * Moulds, gases, chemicals, particles and cigarette smoke can increase the risk of developing asthma
- * There is no cure for the condition.

(Sources: Asthma Australia, National Asthma Council Australia, ABS)

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