

UC San Diego to Participate in Nationwide Trial to Assess Impact of Omega-3 Fatty Acid on the Progression of Alzheimer's Disease

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Nutritionists have long endorsed fish as part of a heart-healthy diet, and now some studies suggest that omega-3 fatty acids found in the oil of certain fish and algae as well as human breast milk may also benefit the brain by lowering the risk of Alzheimer's disease. In order to test whether docosahexaenoic acid (DHA), an omega-3 fatty acid, can impact the progression of Alzheimer's disease, researchers around the country will conduct clinical trials supported by the National Institute on Aging (NIA), part of the National Institutes of Health. In San Diego, trials will be conducted at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD) Shiley-Marcos Alzheimer's Disease Research Center and at the Pacific Research Network.

The local effort is part of a nationwide consortium of leading Alzheimer's disease researchers supported by NIA and coordinated by UCSD. The trial will take place at 52 sites across the United States. It seeks 400 participants, age 50 and older, with mild to moderate Alzheimer's disease.

Joseph Quinn, M.D., associate professor of neurology at Oregon Health and Science University, is directing the national study. Locally, the study will be conducted by UCSD's Michael Rafii, M.D., Ph.D., and Stephen Thein, Ph.D. of Pacific Research Network.

Researchers will primarily evaluate whether taking DHA over many months slows the progression of both cognitive and functional decline in people with mild to moderate Alzheimer's. During the 18-month clinical trial, investigators will measure the progress of the disease using standard tests for functional and cognitive change.

"Evidence to date – from various research studies that have examined the effect of omega-3 fatty acids on Alzheimer's disease – merits further evaluation in a rigorous clinical trial," says Rafii. "Our hope is that we may find out that DHA plays a role in slowing the progression of this destructive disease."

In the Framingham Heart Study as well as in recent European studies, scientists reported that people with the highest blood levels of DHA were about half as likely to develop dementia as those with lower levels.

“Study volunteers will be critical to helping us find out if DHA can make an impact on the disease process,” says Thein.

For the clinical trial, the Martek Biosciences Corporation of Columbia, Md., will donate a pure form of DHA made from algae devoid of fish-related contaminants. Participants will receive either two grams of DHA per day or an inactive placebo pill. About 60 percent of participants will receive DHA, and 40 percent will get the placebo. Doctors and nurses at the 52 research clinic sites will monitor the participants in regular visits throughout the trial. To ensure unbiased results, neither the researchers conducting the trial nor the participants will know who is getting DHA and who is receiving the placebo.

In addition to monitoring disease progression through cognitive tests, researchers will also evaluate whether taking DHA supplements has a positive effect on physical and biological markers of Alzheimer’s such as brain atrophy or proteins in blood and spinal fluid.

To learn how to participate in the study, the UCSD Alzheimer’s Disease Research Center at 858-622-5800, the NIA’s Alzheimer’s Disease Education and Referral Center at 1-800-438-4380 or email adear@nia.nih.gov

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