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Something fishy in Steelers' diet aids cardiovascular health

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By David Templeton, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

And you thought it was the coaching.

But one fat advantage the Steelers have held over their opponents this year has involved a secret supplement that should offend no one but the Miami Dolphins.

The Steelers have been swallowing fish oil.

Thirty-six Steelers, ages 23 to 41, participated in a two-year study to determine the cardiovascular advantages of moderately high doses of fish oil. Results conclude that the omega-3 oil raised their high-density lipoproteins (good cholesterol) and lowered very low-density lipoproteins (a form of bad cholesterol) and triglycerides.

The study appears in the new journal, *Sports Health: A Multi-Disciplinary Approach*.

Experts say fish oil also is an anti-inflammatory agent, which allows athletes to heal faster from injury while improving attention span, reaction time and cognitive processing.

"[Steelers Head Coach] Mike Tomlin is an amazing guy, but I think there was something else going on there," said Dr. Michael Gross, an omega-3 expert and chief medical officer of Lifeguard Health LLC, a fish-oil supplement company in Plymouth Meeting, Montgomery County.

It's not known how many Steelers continued using the fish oil after the study, but doctors said participants were schooled on the beneficial results and competitive advantages it provides.

"This is very simple and safe therapy that's inexpensive," said Dr. James Ehrlich, chief medical officer for Atherotech Inc. of Birmingham, Ala. that developed the Vertical Auto Profile test used to analyze cholesterol levels. "Their numbers look very good."

The study says 82 percent of 233 retired National Football League players under age 50 were found to have abnormal narrowing and blockages of arteries, compared with the general population of the same age.

Dr. Ehrlich noted that many offensive and defensive linemen are obese and have the precursor to diabetes known as metabolic syndrome, along with high blood pressure and cholesterol. About 40 percent also suffer from sleep apnea. Football injuries often render them unable to exercise after retirement. Together, the factors are a formula for heart disease.

"The NFL athlete statistically is at higher risk for future cardiovascular disease and sudden heart attack," Dr. Ehrlich said. "The study demonstrated effectively and dramatically that fish oil improved good cholesterol and lowered damaging particles and triglycerides. It went in the right direction for all of them."

Two years ago, Dr. Joseph C. Maroon, vice chairman of neurological surgery at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, and Jeffery Bost, wrote the book, "Fish Oil: The Natural Anti-inflammatory." Dr. Maroon, who also is the team neurosurgeon for the Steelers, said he successfully used fish oil to reduce arthritis in his hands when ibuprofen use led to a stomach ulcer.

That led to discussions with Dr. Anthony Yates, a UPMC internal medicine specialist and Steelers team doctor. Drs. Yates and Maroon along with Mr. Bost, a physician's assistant, approached Steeler Trainer John Norwig, who helped to get the study underway on a random sampling of Steelers. Some were placed on fish oil while others used a placebo as the control group.

Highly purified fish oil supplements with mixed levels of EPA (eicosapentaenoic acid) and DHA (docosahexaenoic acid) -- the two healthful polyunsaturated fats in fish oil -- were used for 60 days.

Good cholesterol, or HDL levels, rose on average by 26 percent in the treatment group compared with 14 percent in the

control group. The treatment group also experienced an 8 percent decline in triglycerides, while the control group had a 44 percent increase. High triglyceride levels are a good predictor of coronary heart disease.

Although no significant changes in LDL or bad cholesterol were noted, declines in damaging particles -- including very low-density and intermediate-density lipoproteins -- were noted in those using fish oil.

Despite the small number of participants, "rather dramatic improvements in blood lipid profiles were achieved using moderately high doses of omega-3 fish oil supplementation," the study states.

The results suggest that "the professional NFL player should consider continued use of omega-3 supplementation throughout his active years and in retirement."

The study notes that Dr. Maroon, as a study coauthor, has a potential conflict of interest as a member of the advisory board for Nordic Naturals, which produces fish-oil supplements.

"The first role of a physician is prevention of disease," Dr. Maroon said. "I'd much rather prevent disease than treat it after it occurs.

"These athletes are intelligent and know what's best for their bodies and minds. With the scientific reports of the benefits of fish oil, they were quite enthusiastic to participate," he said.

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