

Small Fish, Big Payoff: Why Sardines Belong on Your Plate

4 MIN READ

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They're good for the brain, heart, gut, and bones. Here, five reasons sardines are a serious superfood, and five ways to get the biggest benefits.

Look in the pantries and cupboards of most European households, and you're bound to find tinned fish like sardines. If you've ever been to Lisbon, for example, you know just how seriously the Portuguese take their *conservas*: whole shops are devoted to the stunningly wrapped tins stacked floor to ceiling.

For us Americans, it's taken a little longer to adopt tinned fish as something we should be eating, let alone a household staple. But recently sardines have been having their moment stateside, and unlike plenty of nutritional trends, there's actually good reason to get on board.

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5 Ways Sardines Are A Longevity SuperFood

Besides being inexpensive and versatile, these tiny tins pack an impressive amount of nutrition into a small serving, providing high-quality protein, omega-3 fatty acids, vitamin B12, vitamin D, calcium, iron, and more. That translates into numerous

benefits for heart health, brain health, and longevity.

And, because sardines are small and low on the food chain, they generally contain less mercury than larger predatory fish, making them a great option for most people at every life stage — including pregnancy. So, move over tuna and salmon: even the smallest seafood can make big waves.Â

1) Sardines Boost Brain HealthÂ

Sardines are a small fish with some pretty big brain-health benefits, thanks to their omega-3 fatty acids EPA and DHA. DHA is particularly important for the brain as itâ??s a major structural component of brain cell membranes and helps neurons communicate efficiently.

While the research on whole sardines and cognition is limited, **a randomized trial using sardine oil** found changes in brain activity during working-memory tasks in older adults. More broadly, research on fish and omega-3s has found associations between higher fish intake and lower risk of cognitive decline.

Other research has found associations between higher omega-3 levels and measures of memory, processing speed, and brain structure. **A randomized trial** found that DHA supplementation improved certain measures of learning and memory in older adults experiencing age-related cognitive decline.

A 3.75-ounce can of sardines also provides roughly 24% of the Daily Value for vitamin D, which also plays a role in brain function, helping to reduce brain inflammation. As we recently reported, people with **higher vitamin D levels in their 30s and 40s** displayed significantly less tau burden on brain scans roughly 16 years later, especially in the brain regions affected early on in the progression of Alzheimerâ??s disease.

Research has also found an association between lower vitamin D levels and depression, while some randomized trials suggest that vitamin D supplementation may

help reduce depressive symptoms, particularly in people with low vitamin D status.

Vitamin D, aka the sunshine vitamin is one that many people are deficient in during the winter months when sun exposure is limited. Since we really can only get vitamin D from a handful of foods, including sardines in our diets (especially in the winter) is a good move for supporting our mood and overall brain health.Â

2) Sardines Support Heart HealthÂ

Sardines bring another major benefit to the table thanks to their high omega-3 content: well-established cardiovascular benefits.

A meta-analysis of 171 randomized controlled trials found that EPA and DHA supplementation significantly reduced triglycerides, systolic blood pressure, diastolic blood pressure, heart rate, and C-reactive proteinâ??all markers that are relevant to cardiovascular health.

And thereâ??s research specifically on sardines, too. In a **12-month randomized controlled trial** involving 152 older adults with prediabetes, participants who incorporated sardines into their diet had improvements in several cardiometabolic markers compared with the control group, including higher HDL cholesterol, lower triglycerides, lower blood pressure, and improved insulin resistance.Â

The sardine group also had greater intake of vitamin D and taurine, the latter a conditionally essential amino acid that supports cardiovascular health and nervous system function.

So, while no food is a magic bullet for heart health, eating more sardines is an easy way to add several heart-supportive nutrients to your diet at once that can not only benefit your health today but for many years to come.

3) Sardines May Improve Gut Health

When we think about fish, **gut health** may not be the first benefit that comes to mind. But beyond their heart and brain health benefits, the omega-3s in sardines may also help support a healthier gut microbiome. Research suggests that EPA and DHA can interact with gut bacteria and influence intestinal inflammation and the integrity of the gut barrier.

In a small randomized trial, people with type 2 diabetes who ate 100 grams of sardines five days a week for six months experienced positive changes in their gut microbiota. **Reviews of the broader research** also suggest that omega-3s may influence gut microbial composition and the production of beneficial short-chain fatty acids, although human research is still limited.

4) Sardines are Good For Bone Health

Sardines are also a bone-building powerhouse, which becomes more important to support as we age, especially for women. The soft and edible bones found in pressure cooked and canned sardines are a significant source of calcium, the primary mineral that builds the hard structural framework of bone, while the fish itself contains vitamin D, which helps the body absorb it. You'll find roughly **350 milligrams of calcium and 4 micrograms of vitamin D** in each can.

A 2026 meta-analysis of 14 observational studies involving more than 26,000 people found that higher fish intake was associated with a lower risk of osteoporosis, although the authors note that more prospective and intervention studies are needed to establish causation.

5) Sardines Are Linked to Longevity

Could regularly eating sardines be one small habit associated with a longer, healthier life? While there isn't research showing that sardines specifically extend lifespan, the evidence around overall fish consumption and in particular, *small* fish

consumption is pretty interesting.Â

In a 2024 study of more than 80,000 Japanese adults, researchers found that more frequent consumption of small fish was associated with a lower risk of all-cause and cancer mortality in women over approximately nine years of follow-up.Â

The bigger picture is encouraging, too. **A 2025 umbrella review of systematic reviews** found that higher fish consumption was associated with lower all-cause mortality, while earlier research involving more than one million people found a similar association between fish, long-chain omega-3 intake, and lower mortality risk.Â

It's important to note that these studies can't prove that eating fish causes people to live longer, but they definitely add to the growing evidence that fish can be part of a dietary pattern associated with healthy aging and longevity â?? all the more reason to add sardines to your grocery list this week.

Easy Ways to Eat More Sardines

- ■ Toss sardines into pasta with lemon, olive oil and capersÂ
- ■ Add a couple of mashed up sardines to chicken or tuna saladÂ
- ■ Lightly mash them into garlic-rubbed sourdough toast with tomatoes, olive oil and capersÂ
- ■ Add them to a grain bowl with rice or quinoa, roasted vegetables, and avocado with a lemon tahini dressingÂ
- ■ Stir them into tomato sauce for pasta or shakshukaÂ
- ■ Blend them into your salad dressing

5 Ways to Get the Biggest Benefits

Eat your sardines tinned and whole: Some people avoid sardines because the preparation is a pain (you’d admittedly have to have surgical precision to filet something smaller than your pinky). Thankfully, none of that is necessary with tinned fish. Unlike in fresh sardines, the bones and skin are completely edible and only add to the health benefits.

Buy wild-caught: Wild-caught fish have fewer contaminants than farmed varieties not to mention better nutritional profiles.

Choose the right liquid: When choosing between tinned brands, pick those packed in extra virgin olive oil or water, while avoiding those packaged in soybean or canola oil.

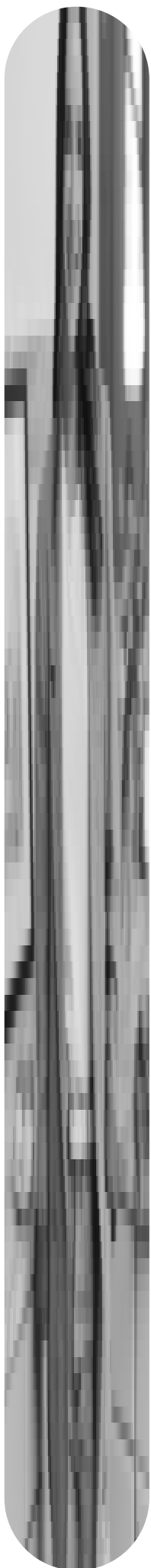
Add lemon: If it’s the taste of sardines that stops you from trying them, adding a squeeze of lemon juice could enhance the flavor while also helping iron absorption.

Eat them 1-2 times per week: Studies show that when you eat sardines that often, the cardiometabolic benefits outpace those of fish oil supplements.

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