Print

The Government's Big Fish Story

Scientists worldwide are praising a nutrient so powerful that it may help combat dozens of diseases. But don't expect an endorsement from our policy makers: They say we can do without.

By Sabrina Rubin Erdely and Denny Watkins, Men's Health

1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Next >

When Randal McCloy was rushed to West Virginia University Ruby Memorial Hospital's intensive-care unit, he was practically dead. The 27-year-old coal miner had spent 41 hours buried 2 ½ miles underground after an explosion in the Sago, West Virginia, mine where he'd been working. His 12 oxygen-starved colleagues had all perished.

Find More

Men'sHealth
TONS OF USEFUL STUFF

- The Best Supplements for Men
- How to Cook What You Catch
- You Can Have a Better Body

"As far as we know, he survived the longest exposure to carbon monoxide poisoning," says Julian Bailes, M.D., the neurosurgeon assigned to the case. McCloy was in a coma and in deep shock, his heart barely beating, one of his lungs collapsed, his liver and both kidneys shut down. Even if he somehow managed to pull through, doctors predicted McCloy would be severely brain damaged, since the carbon monoxide had stripped the protective myelin sheath from most of his brain's neurons. "It's very difficult to come back from a brain injury," says Dr. Bailes. "There's no drug that can help that."

While McCloy was being given oxygen infusions in a hyperbaric chamber, Dr. Bailes was struck by inspiration: He ordered a daily dose of 15,000 milligrams (mg) docosahexaenoic acid (DHA) and eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA) for the miner. In layman's terms?

"Fish oil," says Dr. Bailes.

Several weeks passed. Then, unexpectedly, McCloy emerged from his coma. This in itself was amazing, but he wasn't done. In the weeks that followed, he stunned even the most optimistic experts by recovering his memory and gradually regaining his ability to walk, talk, and see, a turnaround that many in the medical field called miraculous.

Although Dr. Bailes believes the hyperbaric chamber may have worked some magic on the myelin, he thinks much of the credit belongs elsewhere. "The omega-3s helped rebuild the damaged gray and white matter of his brain," says Dr. Bailes, who now takes his own medicine, swallowing a fish-oil supplement each morning. On his orders, McCloy, still recuperating at home, continues to take fish oil daily. "I would say he should be on it for a lifetime," says Dr. Bailes. "But then, I think everybody should."

Maybe what fish oil needed all along was a better publicist. After all, this isn't the medical community's first infatuation with omega-3s. Back in 1970, a pair of Danish researchers, Hans Olaf Bang and Jørn Dyerberg, traveled to Greenland to uncover why the Eskimo population there had a low incidence of heart disease despite subsisting on a high-fat diet. Their finding: The Eskimos' blood contained high levels of omega-3s, establishing the first link to heart health. But even though this discovery spurred additional omega-3 research throughout the '70s and '80s, the public remained more interested in other nutrients—none of which had the unfortunate words "fish" or "fatty" in their names.

There are three types of omega-3s: DHA and EPA, found in fish and marine algae (which is where the fish get them), and alpha-linolenic acid (ALA), which is found in plants, seeds, and nuts. All three have health benefits, but those attributed to DHA and EPA have sparked renewed interest in recent years. Studies show that this tag team may not only reduce a person's risk of heart disease and stroke but also possibly help prevent ailments as diverse as arthritis, Alzheimer's disease, asthma, autoimmune disorders, and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder—and those are just the A's. Researchers are now exploring if these multifunctional fats can, among other things, ward off cancer and even make prison inmates less violent. It's enough to make omega-3 geeks downright giddy.

"Omega-3s are fantastic!" says Jing X. Kang, M.D., Ph.D., a Harvard University researcher who made the news by genetically engineering pigs to produce omega-3s in their meat. "Not just for your heart but also for brain function, immunity function