An Open Letter regarding recent reports that low-fat fish like tilapia are unhealthy. (July 16, 2008)

Eating fish, especially oily fish, at least twice per week is recommended for heart disease prevention. Fish is low in total and saturated fats, high in protein and essential trace minerals, and contains long-chain omega-3 fatty acids (EPA and DHA). Oily fish rich in these healthy omega-3s include salmon, trout, albacore tuna, sardines, anchovies, mackerel and herring. Our omega-3 needs can also be met by eating less-oily (lower-fat) fish more often.

Tilapia and catfish are examples of lower-fat fish that have fewer omega-3s than the oily fish listed above, but still provide more of these heart-healthy nutrients than hamburger, steak, chicken, pork or turkey. Actually, a 3 ounce serving of these fish provides over 100 mg of the long chain omega-3 fatty acids EPA and DHA. Considering that this is about the current daily intake of these fatty acids in the US, even these fish should be considered better choices than most other meat alternatives. Since they are also relatively low in total and saturated fats and high in protein, they clearly can be part of a healthy diet.

US Department of Agriculture statistics indicate that farmed tilapia and catfish contain somewhat more omega-6 fatty acids than omega-3. Most health experts (including organizations such as the American Heart Association and the American Dietetic Association) agree that omega-6 fatty acids are, like omega-3s, heart-healthy nutrients which should be a part of everyone's diet. Omega-6 fatty acids are found primarily in vegetable oils (corn, soybean, safflower, etc) but also in salad dressings, nuts, whole-wheat bread, and chicken.

Replacing tilapia or catfish with "bacon, hamburgers or doughnuts" is absolutely not recommended.

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