Fatty acids are the basic building blocks of which fats and oils are composed. Contrary to popular myth, the body does need some of the right kind of fat. The fatty acids that are necessary for health and that cannot be made by the body are called essential fatty acids (EFA's). EFA's must be supplied through the diet.

EFA's have desirable effects on many disorders. They improve the skin and hair, reduce blood pressure, aid in the prevention of arthritis, lower cholesterol and triglyceride levels, and reduce the risk of blood clot formation. Found in high concentrations in the brain, EFA's aid in the transmission of nerve impulses, and are needed for the normal development and functioning of the brain. A deficiency of EFA's can lead to an impaired ability to learn and recall information.

Every living cell in the body needs EFA's. They are essential for rebuilding and producing new cells. They are also used by the body for the production of prostaglandins, hormonelike substances that act as chemical messengers and regulators of various body processes.

There are two basic categories of EFA's, designated omega-3 and omega-6. Omega-3 EFA's, including alpha-linolenic acid and eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA), are found in fresh deep water fish, fish oil, and certain vegetable oils. Omega-6 EFA's, which include linoleic and gama-linoleic acids, are found primarily in raw nuts, seeds, legumes, and in unsaturated vegetable oils. In order to supply EFA's, these oils must be consumed in pure liquid or supplement form and must not be subjected to heat, either in processing or cooking. Heat destroys EFA's.

The daily requirement for EFA's is satisfied by an amount equivalent to 10 to 20 percent of total fat intake.