



Food

Oils ain't oils

Shamala Ratnesar reckons omega-3 fatty acids will help her live to 100.

STORY **HELEN O'NEILL** PHOTOGRAPHY **NICK CUBBIN**

It took Shamala Ratnesar a while to put things together. She was taking a master's degree in nutrition at NSW's University of Wollongong, where a series of projects was under way into the properties of omega-3 fatty acids. The substances – polyunsaturated fats essential to human life that are found in everything from fish to walnuts – fascinated her, and she started looking into the research worldwide.

"The deeper I went, the more amazing it was," says the Sydney-based dietician. "Sometimes things look good on the surface, then you dig a bit deeper and find holes. Here, the more I studied the more compelling it was.

"[These substances] have such amazing effects on so many different conditions. Not just heart disease and diabetes and rheumatoid arthritis; they are applicable to every one of us, from unborn babies up to seniors, and I don't know of any other food group or nutrient that has this kind of impact."

she says. "That is when I started thinking, 'Oh my gosh, this is amazing.'"

Ratnesar's father, a Sri Lankan respiratory physician who settled here with his family in 1984, reminded her that her grandparents ate fish and other seafood almost every day. Her own childhood eating habits were similar.

"Then gradually I started linking my childhood with omega-3s and my family's longevity," she says. "My great grandmother was 96; my grandmother was 97. My mum is going to be 75 and she looks 55, very energetic. I could very well hit 100. I would be surprised, I guess, if I didn't."

Ratnesar, who is very youthful, stresses that she is more than what she eats, describing her make-up as "a combination of good genes and good food", but adds that her years of clinical practice, providing dietary advice to everyone from diabetics to those with heart disease, have yielded "amazing results".

"Can I go through the life cycle?" she says,

responding to a question about just how vital omega-3s are. "Unborn babies need omega-3s for proper development of their brains and their vision; school-going children need omega-3s for optimum performance at school. We've all heard the saying fish is brain food – not an old wives' saying, but very true." And, Ratnesar asserts, "Adults need omega-3s to prevent serious ailments like heart disease, cancer, diabetes, or to manage them if we already have them; to boost our immune systems, and reduce inflammation. Seniors need omega-3s to prevent osteoporosis and depression, and to delay the ageing process. There is a huge range of conditions where they come into play."

Quizzed on the dangers of not eating omega-3s, Ratnesar replies: "The first thing that probably would happen is your cholesterol levels rise, your triglyceride levels rise, then you might have a heart attack. If you survive that, you may even have a second

attack; or you could get diabetes, or cancer."

In the past year, Ratnesar has started to place several of her omega-3 fortified eggs into one basket. She published a book, *The Omega-3 Life Program*, to help clarify why these substances are so important. The book contains recipes and meal plans for those with specific diseases. For example, a single serving of the adapted Sri Lankan dish below contains an entire week's omega-3 needs, Ratnesar says.

Ratnesar is opening two new clinical practices, wants to write more books, and is making plans for a health food store where every product would be scientifically proven.

"The changes I am recommending are quite simple," she says. "Having fish two to three times a week, simple. Using canola margarine instead of butter or polyunsaturated margarine, very simple. Using olive oil, mustard seed oil or canola oil in cooking instead of lard or vegetable oils, easy change. A handful of nuts each day – yummy.

"I often say jokingly, though it is not really a joke, half of life's problems can be solved with omega-3s." ☉

SPICY MACKEREL PATTIES

- 2 x 415g cans mackerel, drained
- ¼ teaspoon turmeric (optional)
- 2 tablespoons mustard seed oil
- 2 medium onions, chopped finely
- 4 cloves garlic, chopped finely
- 1 teaspoon mustard seeds
- 500g potatoes, boiled & mashed
- 3-4 green chillies, deseeded and chopped finely (use more if you like a hotter taste)
- 3 teaspoons lemon juice
- 1 teaspoon finely chopped fresh ginger
- ½ cup tomato sauce
- 2 omega-3 eggs, beaten
- salt and freshly cracked pepper, to taste
- ½ cup (70g) breadcrumbs

Place the drained mackerel in a bowl. Break up the fish and bones as finely as possible; stir through the turmeric and set aside. Heat the mustard seed oil in a frying pan and sauté the onions and garlic until softened. Add the mustard seeds and mackerel and stir until heated through. Transfer mixture to a large bowl and add the mashed potato, green chillies, lemon juice, ginger, tomato sauce and two tablespoons of the beaten egg. Season with the salt and pepper and mix well. Shape the mixture into patties, not more than 2cm in height, with a ½ cup measure. Dip patties in the remaining egg and coat with breadcrumbs. Lay the patties in a single layer on a greased baking tray. Spray top of patties lightly with canola spray, if desired. Bake at 180°C for 20-30 minutes. Serve with rice and mango chutney. Makes about 15.