

OMEGA-3 STUDY AIMS TO GIVE SOLDIERS A COGNITIVE ADVANTAGE

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Second lieutenants entering the Infantry Basic Officer Leaders Course (IBOLC) at Fort Benning, Ga., can now participate in a study that will determine if omega-3 supplementation improves cognitive processes in high-performing warfighters.

The Ranger Resilience and Improved Performance on Phospholipid Bound Omega-3s study, conducted by the Medical University of South Carolina (MUSC), is a voluntary, double-blind placebo trial that will last until spring of 2018, said Bernadette Marriott, Ph.D., professor and director of the Nutrition Section, Division of Gastroenterology and Hepatology at MUSC.

“We’re assessing cognitive processes. Specifically, we are studying concepts such as decision making and attention and impulsivity, and we’re doing this with computer-based cognitive tests,” said Marriott. “We’re hoping to learn if we can improve cognitive performances under stress, because these young people, who are going through [IBOLC] and Ranger [school], are clearly under stress during specific times in their programs. We’re testing them during those times.”

The study’s protocol specifically targets the population of young Soldiers as top performing, tactical athletes, according to CPT Jeffrey Wismann, Platoon Leader Academy officer in charge and commander of C Company, 2nd Battalion, 11th Infantry Regiment.

“What is unique in this study is we are testing this on what we consider some of our highest tier performers by selecting Infantry officers as the test group. And we still want to see if we see a relative increase in their performance, specifically their cognitive performance, as a result of supplementation.”

According to Marriott, participants will first be briefed and have the opportunity to ask questions before signing up and conducting their baseline testing.



Second lieutenants assigned to the 199th Infantry Brigade’s Infantry Basic Officer Leaders Course exit a Stryker during a field training exercise at Fort Benning.
(Maneuver Center of Excellence photo)

Once they are in the study, they will be randomized into the placebo and experimental groups and will receive their first eight-week supply of capsules. At eight weeks, they'll check in with the MUSC team for their assessments and receive their next eight-week supply. Participants will also be assessed before and after Ranger School.

MUSC worked with the course's leadership to determine recruitment strategies, such as providing a free six-month supply of the omega-3 supplements to participants when they finish the study, added Marriott.

"They need to make assessments related around specific physical events embedded in our course, and we helped [MUSC] identify what those key and critical times are so they can get their best research results," said Wismann.

The goal is to invest in Soldiers themselves the same kind of capability overmatch on the battlefield as would be achieved with a weapon system with a greater range or greater explosive power, Wismann said.

"It's extremely important for all of our combat arms leaders to be able to exercise cognitive dominance, because it is no longer just a matter of getting to the front lines, of getting to the fight. They now have to be able to make potentially, not only life-altering, but strategic decisions at the lowest levels at the front lines while physically exhausted," he said.

(Desiree Dillehay works for the Fort Benning Public Affairs Office.)