

How important is vitamin D?

Here in Spain we are definitely in the right place to get the very important vitamin D and without the right levels we can suffer many illnesses – Osteoporosis and immune deficiency diseases just to name a few. But are we still getting enough? The vitamin, 'D' is nicknamed the "sunshine vitamin" because the skin makes it from ultraviolet rays. Sunscreen blocks its production and we know we need to protect ourselves from skin cancer but now scientists are questioning the sunscreen advice as we may not be getting enough of this all important Vitamin.

The reason is that vitamin D increasingly seems important for preventing and even treating many types of cancer. Recently, four separate studies found it helped protect against lymphoma and cancers of the prostate, lung and, ironically, the skin. The strongest evidence at the moment is for colon cancer.

Many people aren't getting enough vitamin D. It's hard to derive from food and fortified milk alone, and supplements can be problematic as it is difficult to know the correct dosage.

If in doubt ask your doctor to check your Vitamin D levels with a simple test. If you are constantly getting colds, flu, infections or virus' it might just be because you are lacking in Vitamin D. It is really important to check your level if you have been diagnosed with Osteoporosis/Osteopenia, as Vitamin D is so crucial to bone health and calcium absorption.

So the thinking is this: Even if too much sun leads to skin cancer, which is rarely deadly, too little sun may be worse.

No one is suggesting that people fry on a beach. But many scientists believe that "safe sun," 15 minutes or so a few times a week without sunscreen is not only possible but helpful to health.

Vitamin D occurs naturally in salmon, tuna and other oily fish, and is routinely added to milk. However, diet accounts for very little of the vitamin D circulating in blood.

Supplements contain the nutrient, but most use an old form — D-2 — that is far less potent than the more desirable D-3. Multivitamins typically contain only small amounts of D-2 and include vitamin A, which offsets many of D's benefits. There is more and more evidence supporting the need for Vitamin D3, so if you are taking supplements check that you are getting the right kind of Vitamin D, as normal vitamin D pills might not raise vitamin D levels much at all.

Government advisers can't even agree on an RDA, or recommended daily allowance for vitamin D. Instead, they say "adequate intake" is 200 international units a day up to age 50, 400 IUs for ages 50 to 70, and 600 IUs for people over 70. I have read various contradictory results, so I think it is safe to say we need to make sure we are getting regular natural doses of vitamin D for our

health. Many scientists think adults need 1,000 IUs a day. Some research suggests 1,500 IUs might be needed to significantly curb cancer.

How vitamin D may do this is still under study, but there are lots of reasons to think it can:

Lab and animal studies show that vitamin D stifles abnormal cell growth, helps cells die when they are supposed to, and curbs formation of blood vessels that feed tumors.

Cancer is more common in the elderly, and the skin makes less vitamin D as people age.

Vitamin D gets trapped in fat, so obese people have lower blood levels of D. They also have higher rates of cancer.

Diabetics, too, are prone to cancer, and their damaged kidneys have trouble converting vitamin D into a form the body can use.

Too much vitamin D from supplements can be dangerous but on the other hand, D from sunshine has no such limit. It's almost impossible to overdose when getting it this way. However, it is possible to get skin cancer and so we still need to take necessary precautions if spending a long time in the sun and ensuring that the skin does not burn. As most of us know repeated sunburns especially in childhood and among redheads and very fair-skinned people have been linked to melanoma, but there is no credible scientific evidence that moderate sun exposure can cause skin cancer.

Once again we know that moderation is the key as with everything in life. So make sure you are getting some sunlight for at least 15 to 20 minutes a day on bare skin with no lotions or sun block.

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