

Like clockwork

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Vitamin D Defense

With all the health and diet gimmicks out there, it's hard to believe that a miracle nutrient has been right under our noses the entire time. Vitamin D, specifically Vitamin D3 -- the kind that's synthesized by the skin when it's exposed to the ultraviolet-B rays of sunlight -- is good for everything from your bones to your brain. Read on to learn about just four of the ways Vitamin D protects your health.

Infection

Forget C. It's vitamin D that appears to mount the strongest defense against the common cold. When investigators from the University of Colorado in Denver asked 19,000 people of all ages about their health habits and then took blood samples, they discovered that those with the lowest level of vitamin D reported 40% more respiratory problems, including more frequent colds, than those who had normal D levels. According to medical experts, D protects against illness by regulating a protein that destroys microscopic invaders like bacteria, fungus and viruses and also prevents the immune system from releasing too many inflammatory agents called "chemokines" and "cytokines" into infected lung tissues.

Bones

You are probably aware of how important calcium is for building and maintaining bone health but did you know that Vitamin D is just as important? Along with calcium, vitamin D also helps to prevent and treat osteoporosis. In fact, there is a vast body of literature supporting the increase of vitamin D and calcium intake as an effective method for decreasing risk of vertebral and nonvertebral fractures, especially for those over the age of sixty. To absorb calcium efficiently, you need an adequate amount of vitamin D as well. This is why it is important to take both nutrients together either in a supplement or the foods you eat.

Cancer

Increasingly research shows that getting enough vitamin D might cut cancer rates, especially in North America where people do not always get year round exposure to sunlight. According to the National Academy of Sciences' Institute of Medicine, adults should take a daily vitamin D3 supplement to help prevent some cancers, including colon cancer and breast cancer. The review is based on 29 observational studies, which didn't directly test vitamin D for cancer prevention. Vitamin D may help prevent cancer in several ways, including maintaining healthy cells with normal life spans, discouraging out-of-control cell reproduction, and hindering the formation of new blood vessels for tumors. The researchers are quick to point out that popping a vitamin is not a prescription or a guarantee you won't get cancer; certainly clinical trials and further research needs to be done.

Brain

Fish truly gets the silver platter for being a brain food because it is so high in Vitamin D. A large British trial published late in 2009 found that eating fish a few times a week is so good for grey matter that it helped people, especially seniors, perform better on simple memory and attention tasks. Other sources offer some of these benefits too though fish seems to be the perfect combination of essential fatty acids like omega-3s and omega-6's and brain-building vitamins. That said, you should always consider mercury levels found in many fish species by checking local fish advisories and general recommendations for safe consumption.



How much D do you need?

The Adequate Intake (AI) for vitamin D for anyone under 50 years is 5 micrograms per day; for people 50 and over, the AI is 10 micrograms per day.



Dr. Corio's Resources

For more information about Vitamin D:

- Mayo Clinic

www.mayoclinic.com

- Women's Health

www.womenshealth.gov

- Medicine Net

www.medicinenet.com

PEARLS

The Question: What are the best sources of Vitamin D and how much of it do I need to stay healthy?

The Research: Government advisers can't agree on a recommended daily allowance for vitamin D so instead they have come up with "adequate intake" guidelines. The Adequate Intake (AI) for vitamin D for Infants, children and adults up to 50 years of age is 5 micrograms of Vitamin D per day (200 IU); pregnant and lactating women of all ages, 5 micrograms of Vitamin D per day (200 IU); adults 51 to 70 years old, 10 micrograms of Vitamin D per day (400 IU); Adults above 70 years old, 15 micrograms of Vitamin D per day (600 IU).

Dr. Corio Says: Besides eating high D foods like oily fish, egg yolks and fortified cereals and popping a supplement, you can also build up your body's D stores by soaking up some rays. For most people, spending 10-15 minutes outdoors everyday with at least 40 percent of skin exposed, a few times weekly will do. If you use sunscreen to protect your skin - - and you should -- consider spending 10-15 minutes in direct sunlight before applying. I advise having blood levels of Vitamin D checked and my recommended intake is 2000 IU daily, obviously higher than official recommendations but within safe limits and may help protect you against things like cancer, depression and heart disease.

The Question: Wouldn't megadosing D above the adequate intake recommendations be even better for me?

The Research: Many scientists think the RAs don't go far enough and that healthy adults need 1,000 IUs of D3 a day. Research from Memorial Sloan Kettering here in New York suggests that 1,500 IUs might be needed to significantly curb cancer. However, there is a lack of consensus on how much vitamin D is needed or the best way to get it. Many experts agree that there is no one, ideal source. Even though sunshine is recommended, the amount needed depends on the season, time of day, where a person lives, skin color and other factors.

Dr. Corio Says: For now it is probably best to stick to the recommendations until a clearer picture emerges. Make sure you get an adequate amount of D from your diet and do get out in the sun for a few minutes daily. Taking a daily supplement that stays within the guidelines certainly can't hurt and it may turn out to be an inexpensive insurance policy against cancer and a host of other health problems. Please talk to me if you want to discuss this topic further.

Sources: webmd.com, Mayoclinic.com, USA Today, articles-base.com

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News Flash

Avoiding the sun can be a real downer says a new study by VU University Medical Center in Amsterdam. Researchers there speculate that low levels of Vitamin D3, the kind that comes from sun exposure, may lead to depression especially in older people who may have spent years staying in the shade, slathered in sun screen. Noting that about 13 percent of older individuals have symptoms of depression, the researchers think that lack of vitamin D might cause an increase in parathyroid hormone levels which in turn may lead to symptoms of depression. The study included 1200 people aged 65-95; individuals with major and minor depression were found to have blood vitamin D levels that were 14 percent lower compared with non-depressed participants. The researchers noted that the depression symptoms disappeared after treatment for the deficiency returned blood levels to normal.