

Let the Sunshine in: Health Benefits of D-3 by Ellen Kamhi, Ph.D., R.N.



Vitamin D is a fat-soluble substance that acts more like a hormone than a vitamin. Vitamin D is vital for many functions in our bodies, including the promotion of strong bones. Current scientific research is discovering that low Vitamin D levels are implicated in most degenerative illnesses. Vitamin D influences a host of key biological functions vital to health and well-being.

Vitamin D is produced naturally by the body after exposure to 20 minutes to a 1/2 hour of sunlight. When sunshine hits the skin, it is converted to Vitamin D by a complex series of chemical reactions. These include two different hydroxylation reactions, one in the liver and one in the kidney, until the active form 1,25-dihydroxyvitamin D [1,25(OH)2D], also called calcitriol, is ready to take on the many essential functions that Vitamin D performs in the body.

Many people develop deficiencies due to lack of sun exposure, living in cold climates, the overuse of sun block and other reasons. Research continues to accumulate showing that Vitamin D deficiency is widespread throughout the population, and that this deficiency is linked to a wide range of diseases, including metabolic syndrome, osteoporosis, autoimmune illnesses such as rheumatoid arthritis as well as several kinds of cancers. One example of the many conditions that may be linked to Vitamin D deficiency is a study that was reported in the Mayo Clinic Proceedings in 2003. Researchers evaluated the levels of Vitamin D of a group of patients who complained of non-specific muscle pains and found that close to 100% of the study participants were deficient in Vitamin D.

In a study published in the Archives of Internal Medicine, in June 2009, the results determined that over an 8 year time period, those people who had the lowest vitamin D levels have more than twice the risk of dying from heart disease and other causes, than those who have an adequate level. To accurately determine your own Vitamin D status, it's a good idea to ask your doctor to order a blood test that measures your level of vitamin D.

Be sure to ask your doctor to order the test that is called 25(OH)D (25-hydroxy-vitamin D), since it is more accurate than another test that is referred to as 1,25(OH)D. When you get the test back, review the results: If you have less than 20 ng/mL, you have a deficiency. Insufficient levels are between 20-29 ng/mL and optimum levels are between 30-80 ng/mL, too high levels and possible toxicity is greater than 80 ng/mL. Many health practitioners recommend that if the reading is lower than 50 ng/mL, it would be useful to supplement with Vitamin D 3, even though 50 ng/ml is considered within opti-

num range.

The National Academy of Sciences recommends that daily intake through all sources should be 200 IUs for children and adults up to age 50, 400 IUs for adults from 51-70, and 600 IU for those over 70 years old. However, new research suggests that these numbers should be increased. In fact, the recommended dose for children was recently raised to 400 IUs/day by the American Academy of Pediatrics.

Many physicians now recommend that adults increase their Vitamin D intake as well. If your numbers are low, make every effort to bring them up. You can do this by increasing your sun exposure to at least 1/2 hour per day, eating more foods that contain vitamin D, and using a good quality Vitamin D Supplement. Foods that contain Vitamin D include fatty fish, such as salmon (wild, not farm-raised), mackerel, sardines and fortified foods such as milk, breakfast cereals and juices where the manufacturers actually add in additional Vitamin D. It's very difficult to get the amount of vitamin D the body actually needs from diet alone.

If you decide to use supplements to increase your levels of Vitamin D, it's important to understand the difference between products that are available. Vitamin D is available in two forms: D2 (ergocalciferol) and D3. Many vegetarians prefer to use Vitamin D 2, since it is manufactured using yeast, while Vitamin D3 is manufactured from lanolin from sheep's wool (the sheep are not killed to collect the wool, which allows Vitamin D 3 to be kosher certified!). However, although both forms are useful to avoid rickets, they are actually metabolized differently in the body.

New research supports the use of Vitamin D 3, since it is three times more effective than D 2 in raising serum 25 hydroxy vitamin D concentrations, and maintaining those levels for a longer period of time. If you decide to supplement with Vitamin D, read the label carefully. The best choice would be Vitamin D 3, in a liquid form. Some brands have a long list of "other ingredients" such as soybean oil (this is genetically modified (GMO) if it does not state "organic"), and other colorings, flavorings and fillers. Choose a brand that has a minimum of fillers, such as ONLY Extra Virgin Olive Oil. After 3 to 4 months, get another 25-hydroxy-vitamin D test done by your doctor, so you can monitor whether your level is going up through the interventions you have initiated.

Ellen Kamhi PhD RN, coauthor of "The Natural Medicine Chest," has been involved in natural health care for over 4 decades. She answers consumer questions at www.naturesanswer.com, and has a private practice on Long Island. For more info, www.naturalnurse.com 800-829-0918.

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