

Vitamin D Facts

Getting enough vitamin D may end up being one of the cheapest, easiest and most important things you can do to improve your long-term health. Vit D is made when your skin is exposed to UVB radiation from the sun and is turned into a hormone that affects 10% of our genes (and counting). It has been associated with many conditions including diabetes, cardiovascular disease, 17 cancers, immunity to colds and flu, auto immune disorders, osteoporosis, chronic pain, depression, brain development in children and possibly autism. 75-80 % of the population are significantly deficient in Vit D. People with darker skin, the elderly, obese people and people with certain diseases are at even greater risk.

How can so many people be deficient?

We have dramatically reduced our time outdoors over the past 30 years and we now use sunscreen, which blocks UVB. Unless your arms, legs and face are regularly exposed to the midday sun without sunscreen (which is strongly discouraged if you have any risk of skin cancer) or you are taking supplements, it is almost impossible to NOT be deficient in Vit D. We need 3000-4000 IUs of Vit D per day just to maintain critical blood levels of calcium. We need even more to produce the hormones that control genes in our tissues. Multivitamins usually have 400 IU of D. Milk has 100 IU. Even salmon, the food with the most Vit D, only has 794 IU per 3 oz serving.

So what should you do?

Some people argue that Vit D deficiency is so widespread and supplements are so safe and inexpensive that everyone should just take 2000 IU a day (or increase midday sun exposure) and that testing be reserved for special circumstances. However I have had patients that had very low levels and had to be on very high doses of Vit D for 6-12 months to reach natural levels. I would certainly encourage anyone that gets minimal sun exposure to get tested, especially if there is a history of medical problems that may be associated with Vit D deficiency. If you are severely deficient, your doctor will probably have you take high doses of Vit D3 for several months. You should be retested every 3-4 months until you reach normal levels of 50-80 ng/mL. Then you should continue to supplement with Vit D3 at a lower dose to maintain those levels year-round.

Vit D also needs several co-factors to work. Magnesium is most important (and frequently deficient). Some Vit D supplements now include these co-factors but eating a green vegetable and a handful of sunflower or pumpkin seeds every day will provide everything you need.

If it's so important why hasn't my doctor mentioned it?

I know people are increasingly skeptical about nutrition advice. Eggs and butter are bad one day and good the next. I am conservative in recommending anything without controlled studies to back me up but there are many studies associating Vit D with health benefits and no studies showing toxicity at doses up to 10,000 IUs per day for years. When we historically produced 10K or more units of Vit D a day outdoors and we suddenly find ourselves indoors most of the time and covered in sunscreen and UV blocking clothes when outdoors, it makes sense to me that most people need to supplement with 2000 IU or more of Vit D3 per day. Many Vit D researchers believe we should be getting 5000 IU or more per day.

Doctors can't be on top of all the literature on every topic and it takes time for research to trickle down. Vit D is cheap and OTC (and the sun is free) so the pharmaceutical companies aren't spending millions on sexy TV ad campaigns or bombarding doctors with information about it. I just happened to notice that more and more patients were being treated for Vit D deficiency and I started researching it. My interest peaked when I was tested and found to be deficient. More and more doctors are starting to routinely test Vit D levels and the American Medical Assoc, American Public Health Assoc and the American Pediatric Assoc have recently increased their recommendations and called for more research on Vit D. Expect to hear more about the effects of Vit D as more studies are completed.

Please see www.vitamincouncil.org for the latest research on Vitamin D.