

# Vitamin D – the Sunshine Vitamin!

Now that the clocks have gone forward and the days are longer, lighter and have recently been a lot warmer, it's a good idea to get outside and enjoy that fresh air and sun!

Its funny how most people seem to say they feel better when the sun is out.....and there may be more to it than simply the thought of summer....it may well be due to Vitamin D!

Vitamin D is a very exciting subject nowadays! Aside from just making you feel good, there are increasingly clear links between the level of Vitamin D in your bloodstream, your bone density and your fracture risk.

## But what does the sun have to do with a Vitamin?

Well, firstly, Vitamin D is not really a vitamin– actually it is quite a misleading name! Firstly, 'true' vitamins cannot be produced by the body - they need to be ingested via the diet, and yet your body manufactures vitamin D when your skin is exposed to sunlight.

The sunlight has the ability to act on chemicals in your skin to kick start the process of your body making vitamin D. As you know, vitamin D is essential for keeping the levels of calcium in the blood stream correct which in turn assists the development and maintenance of a strong skeleton.

Low levels of Vitamin D are associated with reduced muscle strength which can lead to falls and fractures (partly from the fall but also from reduced bone density) as well as other bone diseases such as rickets.

In the UK, between October and March, the suns rays are not strong enough to allow us to make enough vitamin D which means, during these winter months we will be running down our bodies stores. This is why its so important to make the most of the sunny days we have here....obviously in a safe way!

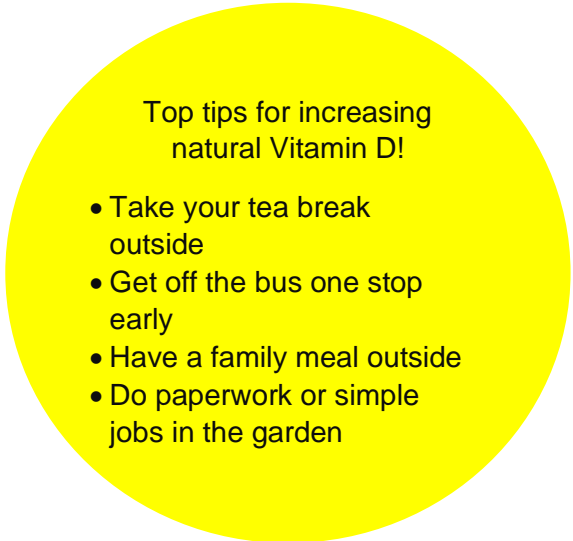
The intensity with which the suns rays, and more specifically the ultraviolet B (UVB) rays, hit the skin doesn't only depend on the time of year but also on cloud cover, latitude (eg the north of Scotland gets weaker UVB rays than say the south coast of England), the time of day, clothes worn, the pigment of your skin and the use of sun screen!

All these factors make it hard to say for sure how much vitamin D you will be getting from sunlight! Furthermore, in recent years we have been told more and more forcefully about the risk believed to be associated to excessive sun exposure.

## So what do we do? What about diet?

Well the simple answer is its unlikely you can get all the vitamin D you need from your diet!

According to the Harvard School of Public Health, you should aim for about 1000-2000IU Vitamin D per day (the safe upper limit for an adult, as determined by the Institute Of Medicine, is 4000IU/day.) which equates to 25-50 micrograms. The average daily intake of vitamin D from food for UK adults is 2.8 micrograms.....way below what we need.



### Top tips for increasing natural Vitamin D!

- Take your tea break outside
- Get off the bus one stop early
- Have a family meal outside
- Do paperwork or simple jobs in the garden



I often get asked if vegetarians and vegans need to be more concerned about Vitamin D than their meat, fish & dairy eating opposites!

The answer is no! The figures above were worked out using a sample of the population that included all dietary modals.

Putting it simply; vitamin D is found naturally in some foods.....but usually the levels are quite low. There are some foods that have added vitamin D. The levels in these foods are often higher than the naturally occurring vitamin D. However, the main source of Vitamin D is still believed to be the sun.

### **So we need to make sure we get enough vitamin D from the sun but in a safe way!**

Here are some tips about safe sun exposure:

- The sun tends to be strongest between 11:00 and 15:00 so, if you know you burn easily, try to avoid exposing your skin to the sun during these times
- Most people can produce enough vitamin D by exposing just the areas that are used to being exposed to the sun e.g. hands, forearms and lower legs.
- Its impossible to produce vitamin D from sunlight that is coming through a window! Its vital to be outside. Unless you are prone to burning, its thought that 10 minutes in the midday sun Monday to Friday and 20 minutes at the weekend will go a long way towards achieving your daily Vitamin D goals. Those with darker skin may require longer exposure.
- Those of you who have more sensitive skin (e.g. those with fair hair and children) may want to get their outside time before 11:00 and after 15:00. However, as the sun is not as strong here, you may need slightly longer time outside.
- Its vital you don't burn! All skin types are able to make sufficient vitamin D for their needs before they start to burn!
- You don't need to refill your entire vitamin D stores in one go! A little boost over a lot of days is the way to go!

That said; its still not always possible to get out in the sun!

First of all, we live in the UK! How many sunny days do we get really? Add to that the fact most of us work indoors and 09:00 – 17:00.

### **So what do we do?**

Well, its still worth trying to get out for short bursts in the sun during your working day. It will actually do you a lot of good to get away from your work station!

But I do understand it's not always possible.....at the time of writing this, a large percentage of the UK population was reported to have lower than ideal levels of vitamin D with 1 in 5 people falling into the 'deficient' category.

With this in mind, and having looked at your own lifestyle, you should now be in a position to consider if a supplement may be useful to take. You can take them all year round or just through winter when our levels naturally drop.

There is no right or wrong.....as long as you stick to the recommended dosage of course!



Health conditions that preclude vitamin D supplementation are *extremely* rare, but if you have any major concerns it may be worth checking with your GP first. 1000IU (25µg) supplements are very cheap and available at most health shops and chemists.

Whether the supplements have precisely the same health benefits as sensible sun exposure has not been studied exhaustively, and although there are ongoing studies, the best ones will take years before their results are ready.

That said, the research that there is looks favourable, with very little evidence of harm.

**So eat well, stay active and get that safe sun exposure when you can.....and if your are at all unsure.....there are supplements to help make up the short fall!**