

Sun and Vitamin D, What's the Big Deal?

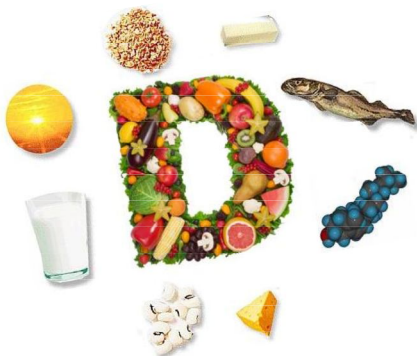
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The Sun and vitamin D are two separate issues that share a common bond important to humans. We can't live without either one, and one is dependent on the other. I remember when I was a teenager, the cool thing to do was put iodine in baby oil. It was then applied to our bodies prior to sun tanning. This would give us a "better burn" from the sun, as if any burn from the sun was good! We knew very little about skin cancer back then, but we sure were increasing our vitamin D levels! We make vitamin D when we are exposed to the sun and having sunscreen on blocks the sun's rays from penetrating our skin. The unfiltered rays of the sun cause skin cancer, but wait I thought we needed the sun to increase our vitamin D levels? Is sun exposure good or bad for us?

Why is vitamin D so important to us? It plays a critical role in the absorption of calcium and phosphorus, which our bodies need for healthy bones and teeth. New studies and research show that higher levels of vitamin D decrease the incidence of stress fractures in adolescents, aids the immune system, and decreases the risk of some chronic conditions such as diabetes, high blood pressure, and cancer.

How much sun exposure do we need to help increase our vitamin D levels, and is this exposure safe? The time exposure is as little as 5 minutes to 30 minutes, several times a week, not every day! The best time is from 10:00 AM to 3:00 PM. "Is any unprotected sun exposure OK?" I'm not sure we have a clear answer. The sun can be more dangerous as we get closer to the Equator, and so less exposure is needed. What if you use indoor tanning or a tanning bed? The same rules apply to indoor tanning. Tanning is the body's response to injury from UV light. The skin cells respond to this light by increasing the production of pigment. Skin color also plays a role in how much vitamin D we make from the sun. Darker skin types decrease the amount of vitamin D made, so longer exposure to the sun is necessary, which again increases the risk of skin cancer. A report on skin cancer in 2002 from the CDC states that since 1973 new cases of the most serious form of skin cancer, melanoma, has increased by 150%.



What else can we do to maintain our vitamin D levels? Sun exposure is only part of the answer. Eating the right foods and taking a supplement of vitamin D are good things to do. Eating fish, such as tuna, salmon, swordfish or taking cod liver oil are good sources of vitamin D. Fortified foods such as milk, yogurt, orange juice, and cereals are another good source of vitamin D. Finally, taking a daily or weekly vitamin D supplement maybe necessary to maintain adequate levels of vitamin D.

I think it is important that everyone knows what their vitamin D level is, so get a baseline vitamin D level. As for sun exposure, ask your physician what is the right amount of unblocked sun exposure for you.



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