

Vitamin D:

What You Need to Know About the "Sunshine" Vitamin

Why do we need vitamin D?

In 1919, Sir Edward Mellanby discovered vitamin D and the role it plays in the development of the childhood bone disease, rickets. Since then, vitamin D has been recognized for its role in enhancing calcium absorption, thereby promoting good bone health. In fact, vitamin D deficiency can also lead to osteomalacia—weak bones in adults. But, new research is suggesting various other roles for vitamin D as well. Adequate vitamin D levels are thought to reduce risk of breast, colon and prostate cancers and play a preventative role in multiple sclerosis, diabetes and rheumatoid arthritis. Finally, emerging research suggests that vitamin D may be involved in optimal functioning of the immune system, mental activities and in reducing risk of periodontal disease—a chronic inflammatory gum disease that can lead to tooth loss.

Where do we get it?

Vitamin D is often referred to as the “sunshine” vitamin because our bodies can make it when our skin is exposed to the sun. About 10-15 minutes of sun exposure per day on our face, hands and arms—without sunscreen—is enough to meet our needs. And because it is a fat-soluble vitamin, it is stored in our fat cells for the days and weeks that we do not get enough sun exposure.

Still, people who live in Canada and the northern U.S. states, those who are not outside often and those with dark skin need to consume vitamin D from their diets. During the long winter months we also need to ensure adequate dietary intake. Good sources of vitamin D include fortified milk, yogurt and fatty fish such as salmon, tuna and sardines. Other foods such as orange juice, margarine and breakfast cereals may be fortified with vitamin D as well. The chart below lists good food sources of vitamin D.

| | Vitamin D (IU) |
|--|----------------|
| Salmon, cooked (3.5 ounces) | 360 |
| Sardines, canned (1.75 ounces) | 250 |
| Tuna, canned (3 ounces) | 200 |
| Milk (1 cup) | 100 |
| Vitamin D-fortified orange juice (1 cup) | 100 |
| Soy beverage (1 cup) | 100 |
| Margarine, fortified (1 tablespoon) | 60 |
| Breakfast cereal, fortified (1 serving) | 40 |
| Egg (1 whole) | 20 |

How much do we need?

For children and adults up to age 50, 200 International Units (IU) is the recommended amount of vitamin D per day. With age, we lose some ability to make the vitamin from sunlight exposure and to



turn it into its active form, so the recommendation increases to 400 IU per day for those aged 51-70 years, and to 600 IU for those older than 70. In these latter groups, supplements may be needed to reach recommended intake levels.

However, these recommendations were set to assure adequate intakes of the vitamin primarily for

bone health. As we learn more about vitamin D and its multiple health benefits, many experts argue that much higher levels are needed for optimal effects. Some researchers would like to see the recommendation increased up to 2,000 IU per day, especially in older people and other high-risk groups. When the committee meets again to reconsider the dietary recommendation, it will likely be increased.

Simple ways to boost your intake:

- Drink at least 2 cups of vitamin D-fortified milk a day.
- Use milk instead of water in making hot chocolate mix, soups and sauces.
- Choose vitamin D-fortified yogurts and cheeses whenever possible.
- Check labels and choose breakfast cereals that are fortified with vitamin D.
- Flake tuna on top of a salad for a hearty lunch ... or make tuna salad sandwiches.
- If you drink soy beverage, choose a vitamin D-fortified brand.
- Grill or bake salmon for a vitamin D-rich meal once a week.




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