

## What about Vitamin D? Vitamin D, the sun, & sunscreen

“It has been estimated that at least 50 percent of older adults worldwide have low vitamin D levels, and the problem is also thought to affect substantial numbers of younger people. Possible reasons include decreased outdoor activities, air pollution and, as people age, a decline in the skin’s ability to produce vitamin D from ultraviolet rays....”<sup>1</sup>

Adequate vitamin D status is known to be important for optimal calcium absorption, and it can reduce the risk for bone loss.<sup>2</sup> Recent research has suggested that having adequate vitamin D may also be helpful in the prevention of some types of cancers<sup>3</sup> and heart disease.<sup>1</sup> Can you use sunscreen and still get enough sunshine to produce vitamin D? “Some doctors believe overuse of sunscreen lotions has contributed, and say just 10 to 15 minutes daily in the sun without sunscreen is safe and enough to ensure adequate vitamin D, although there’s no consensus on that.”<sup>1</sup> “No one is suggesting that people fry on a beach. But many scientists believe that *safe sun* — 15 minutes or so a few times a week without sunscreen — is not only possible but helpful to health.”<sup>3</sup>

Vitamin D is known as the “sunshine vitamin” because the skin makes it from ultraviolet rays. There are also food sources of vitamin D, but these contain smaller amounts of vitamin D.<sup>1</sup> What are the best food sources of Vitamin D? Fatty fish is the primary natural food source. Next are vitamin D-fortified foods, such as: milk and some brands of margarine, ready-to-eat breakfast cereal, enriched rice and pasta, and fruit juices and other fortified drinks—all varying in the amounts of vitamin D contained. For example, one cup of vitamin D-fortified milk provides 100 international units (IU) of vitamin D; 1 cup of vitamin D-fortified orange juice provides 100 IU; and 3 ounces of canned tuna provides 200 IU of vitamin D.<sup>1,2</sup>

“The Institute of Medicine’s current vitamin D recommendations are 200 units daily for children and adults up to age 50, and 400 to 600 units for older adults. But some doctors believe these amounts

are too low and recommend taking supplements.”<sup>1</sup> Still, there is no consensus on how much vitamin D is the right amount to prevent disease. Like most supplements, too much can do harm. “Too much of the pill variety can cause a dangerous buildup of calcium in the body.”<sup>3</sup>

According to the [United States Dietary Guidelines](#) recommendations, older adults, people with dark skin, and people exposed to insufficient sunlight are at greater risk of vitamin D deficiency and may need much more (i.e., 1,000 IU) vitamin D from vitamin D-fortified foods and/or vitamin D supplements.<sup>2</sup>

Consult your physician to see if your Vitamin D intake is adequate. Eat extra vitamin D from vitamin D-fortified foods, and talk with your doctor about using vitamin D supplements if needed.

**It is important not to take this information to the extreme.** You need to protect your skin and that of your children from damage caused by UVA and UVB radiation. Most people get enough vitamin D by simply walking outdoors from the office to their car or to the grocery store front. It is important for researchers to come to a consensus on how much vitamin D is important for disease prevention...in the meantime, choose to eat vitamin D-fortified foods, and use sunscreen if you plan to be outdoors for 20 minutes or more.



**Sources:**

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