

Vitamin D and Sun Exposure – A Balanced Approach

Vitamin D is essential for bone health. It is present in foods such as eggs, fatty fish, fortified cereals, fortified milk, cheese and margarine spreads. Sun exposure is a major source of vitamin D but UV radiation is the main cause of skin cancer. Therefore it is important to balance the risks of developing skin cancer from too much sun exposure while maintaining adequate vitamin D levels.

The amount of time needed in the sun to make enough vitamin D varies from person to person. Many factors affect the ability of our skin to make vitamin D, such as skin type, amount of skin exposed, season, where we are in the world, time of day, and sunscreen use. Midday UV rays are the most intense. Cloudy days, shade, and having dark-coloured skin reduce the amount of vitamin D the skin makes. People living in higher latitudes may have insufficient UV exposure in winter-time for vitamin D.

Despite the importance of the sun for producing vitamin D, it is sensible to limit exposure of skin to sunlight so as to lower the risk for skin cancer. Overall most people should be able to make enough Vitamin D from short, casual sunlight exposure, for example 10-20 minutes exposure to the face and hands in summer time is considered sufficient. Skin should not have to redden or burn to make enough vitamin D. There is no evidence that sunscreen use adversely affects vitamin D status. For the general population with no specific medical issues or risk factors for vitamin D deficiency, supplementation is not necessary and is not recommended.

Spending hours in the sun with the aim for making Vitamin D is a pointless exercise as, when the body has made sufficient Vitamin D, the production process simply switches off and any extra is excreted. But spending longer in strong sun will increase your risk of skin cancer.

People who are most likely to be lacking in vitamin D include:

- People with naturally brown or black skin, for example people of African, Afro-Caribbean or South Asian family origin
- People over the age of 65

- Pregnant and breastfeeding women
- Babies
- People who are housebound or confined inside for long periods of time, for example in hospital

People within these groups may need to take vitamin D supplements.

Enjoying the sun safely, while taking care not to burn, should help most people get a good balance. People should not have to redden or burn to make enough vitamin D.

