



Sue Ann Says: Are you Getting Enough Sun? The Vitamin D Dilemma

We all know we're supposed to avoid sun exposure. We slather on the sun block and stay out of the sun completely during peak hours. In doing so, we reduce our risk of skin cancer and skin damage. But guess what? By avoiding the sun, we may be increasing our risk for other cancers, osteoporosis, heart disease, multiple sclerosis, high blood pressure, depression and other diseases. Insufficient Vitamin D is a risk factor in all these diseases. And what is our main source of Vitamin D? Nope, not a bottle from the pharmacy. It's sun light! Skin exposure to the sun's ultraviolet rays turns our body into a sort of Vitamin D production factory. As we enter yet another cold, grey month in Wisconsin, you can understand Wisconsin women are especially prone to Vitamin D insufficiency.

Scientists are only recently discovering the essential role Vitamin D plays in our health. We've long understood its importance in helping our body absorb calcium, which helps build and maintain bone mass. We're now discovering even more far-reaching benefits. Vitamin D regulates cells throughout the body, impacts insulin production, boosts immune function, and helps prevent inflammation and cancer.

Vitamin D deficiency can lead to a numerous health problems, including:

- Weak, brittle bones, osteoporosis, muscle aches and muscle weakness. The combination of brittle bones and weak muscles increase the risk of falls and fractures, which can be fatal for the elderly.
- Breast, ovarian, prostate, colon, and skin cancers
- Cardiovascular disease and high blood pressure
- Autoimmune disorders such as multiple sclerosis, diabetes and rheumatoid arthritis
- Asthma and other respiratory problems
- Seasonal affective disorder (SAD), a form of depression common in northern latitudes with shorter, darker days through the winter months.

Are you at risk?

Even with the rapidly increasing discovery of Vitamin D's benefits, Vitamin D deficiency is still very common, Carol Sargent, MS, RD, CD, told me. Carol is a clinical nutritionist at University of Wisconsin Hospital and Clinics.

"The discovery of the link between sun exposure and skin cancer and premature aging of the skin triggered massive public health campaigns. We're continually warned to avoid the midday sun, keep our skin covered and apply sun block to any exposed skin," Carol notes. "These campaigns were valuable in educating the public about how to protect themselves from sun-induced skin cancer and skin damage. But the campaigns worked too well. Because of this sun avoidance, now most of us are not making enough Vitamin D in our bodies."

Carol says that most of us here in Wisconsin are probably Vitamin D deficient because of our long winters. People in chronically cloudy or smoggy areas are also at greater risk. Older people, people with

darker skin and those over about age 50 are generally most at risk for Vitamin D deficiency. Obesity and some chronic diseases also impair the body's ability to make and process Vitamin D.

Getting your share of Vitamin D

So how do you make sure that you get enough Vitamin D? Carol says that simply exposing our skin to a bit of sun can do the trick. "Just 10 minutes or so of sun, two to three times a week, without sunscreen, helps most people's bodies make enough Vitamin D," Carol says. The more skin exposed, the more Vitamin D produced. Dark-skinned people require about 10 times the amount of sun exposure as Caucasians to produce an equivalent amount of Vitamin D.

What about the risk of skin cancer? "You need to know your own skin sensitivity," Carol cautions. "If you typically begin to burn after 30 minutes without a sunscreen, 10 minutes in the sun should generate enough Vitamin D. Then it's time for the sunscreen, cover-up and a move to the shade. Don't ever allow your skin to burn."

Carol also emphasizes the need for a balanced diet that is rich in Vitamin D. Good food choices include fatty fish such as tuna and salmon, egg yolks and cod liver oil. Milk is routinely fortified with Vitamin D, as are many other dairy foods, juices, cereals and other products. Check the nutrition labels for Vitamin D content.

Many people, especially those of us here in the north, can't achieve a healthy level of Vitamin D just from sunlight, particularly during the winter months. Researchers recommend varying dosages of Vitamin D supplements, based on gender, age, skin color and many other factors. Carol recommends 400-800 IU per day if you're under the age of 50, and 800-1,000 IU if you're age 50 and older. Look for supplements that contain Vitamin D3 (cholecalciferol) which is better absorbed and is preferred over D2 (ergocalciferol)."

Of course, always ask your doctor whether you need a supplement and the recommended dosage. Talk about maintaining a Vitamin-D rich diet and a healthy cholesterol level. Also talk with your doctor about your risk of skin cancer so together you can weigh your individual benefits versus risks of limited sun exposure.

I spoke with my doctor about Vitamin D and I've upped my levels. I would be D-lighted if you talked with your doctor too, to be sure you are getting enough Vitamin D. After all, it all begins with a health woman...

Yours in good health,

Sue Ann Thompson
Founder & President
Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation

The Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation (WWHF) is a statewide non-profit organization whose mission is to help Wisconsin women and their families reach their healthiest potential. WWHF presents women's health education and outreach programs, funds women's health research, provides scholarships for women in academic medicine, and publishes resource materials. Your donations help the Foundation reach women all over Wisconsin with the information, resources and tools they need to be healthy. To make a donation or to learn more about WWHF visit www.wwhf.org or call 1-800-448-5148.

