



The sunshine vitamin

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What if you could add one simple and inexpensive supplement to your life that could strengthen your bones, fight off some cancers, hold off multiple sclerosis and even fight infections? Wouldn't you just grab it?

New and growing research into the so-called 'sunshine vitamin' (vitamin D), suggests that it might be able to do all these things. Vitamin D is produced naturally by the body from exposure to the sun's ultraviolet rays. In most instances, getting 10 to 15 minutes in the sun outdoors two or three times a week is enough. (This may not be appropriate for people at high risk of skin cancer and others—discuss your situation with your physician first.)

One study of 30,000 women living in areas with varying amounts of sunshine, research suggested that women who had the lowest levels of vitamin D in their blood had double the risk of cancer over those with the highest. While this does not prove that the vitamin protects against cancer, other research helps clarify. Studies have found that vitamin D slows the rate of cell multiplication, a key feature of cancers.

The evidence in favour of vitamin D's benefits was confirmed in June 2007 in a press release from the Canadian Cancer Society in which they recommend supplementing levels of vitamin D. They state: "In consultation with their healthcare provider, the Society is recommending that adults living in Canada should consider taking Vitamin D supplementation of 1000

international units (IU) a day during the fall and winter.... [and that] adults at higher risk of having lower Vitamin D levels should consider taking Vitamin D supplementation of 1000 IU per day year-round.

Now that you have decided to boost your D levels, what can you do? There is the sunshine side already mentioned, but that will not be enough over most of the year. There are very few food sources of vitamin D. They include fortified foods and beverages like milk, soy drinks and margarine. Fatty fish, liver and egg yolks also naturally contain the vitamin. One cup of milk contains about 100 IU; fortified soy or rice beverage, about 80 IU per cup; canned or cooked salmon (75g) is rich in D at 608 IU.

If diet cannot supply enough vitamin D, consider supplements, again, with a physician's guidance.

Vitamin D is starting to look like a wonder-drug of sorts, with all kinds of benefits. But, don't get carried away, either. Health Canada warns overenthusiastic consumers that very high levels of the vitamin can be damaging. They believe that 2000 IU of vitamin D daily is the maximum tolerable amount. Exceeding 2000 IU could lead to an overdose of the vitamin, in turn leading to kidney stones and other damage to the heart, lungs and blood vessels.

The other caution? Sun is an excellent way to naturally generate vitamin D, but it is also an excellent way to get skin cancer if you are not careful.

If diet alone cannot supply enough vitamin D, consider supplements.