

Smart Ways to Enjoy the Gift of Vitamin D

While you're in a giving mood this holiday season, give yourself and your loved ones the hottest nutrition gift of the year: Vitamin **D**. Long known as the "sunshine vitamin," this nutrient has recently taken on an even healthier glow. The studies are stacking up and the experts are changing their recommendations. It turns out that many of us are vitamin **D**-deficient, especially in those with limited sun exposure (during winter and in northern states).

Why all the fuss about **D**? It turns out that strong bones and teeth are at the top of an impressive list of benefits from getting your daily dose of **D**. It is essential for every human cell and it also helps cells communicate with each other. Scientists now believe that **D** helps fight infection, slow muscle loss in aging, and prevent a host of serious health problems, including cancer, heart disease, diabetes, osteoarthritis, gum disease, and autoimmune disorders.

How much is enough? How much is too much?

CHILDREN: For youth, the answer to "how much" is now clear. In October 2008, the American Academy of Pediatrics doubled their recommendation: from 200 IUs (International Units) to 400 IUs per day. From birth through adolescence, all children who do not consume at least a quart of vitamin D-fortified formula or milk per day should take a supplement.

ADULTS: Most vitamin D experts believe that the current guidelines for adults (200 IUs to age 50, 400 IUs from 51 to 70, and 600 IUs for 71+) are probably far too low. The current consensus is that 1000-2000 IUs per day is a healthier goal and many expect this to be the recommended amount when future guidelines are released. While the upper limit of safe intake is currently set at 2000 IUs per day for adults, many vitamin D researchers are urging that this be raised as well.

Smart sun exposure

Vitamin D is called the sunshine vitamin because skin cells can make it from the sun's ultraviolet rays. For fair-skinned people, the smart way to sun is sunscreen on the face - and direct exposure to arms, legs or torso for 10 to 15 minutes at least 2 to 3 times per week. People with darker skin, like American Indians and African Americans, need longer exposure. In winter months, the angle of the sun's rays is too low to make vitamin D, so you need to get your D from other sources.

Smart food sources

Frankly, it is hard to get the currently recommended levels of vitamin D from food sources alone. The only significant sources are fish oils and fortified foods (milk and some yogurt, cheese, juice, and cereal). In the US, fluid milk is fortified with 100 IUs per 8-ounces, so drinking your 3-A-Day will provide 300 IUs. A 3-4 ounce serving of fish (such a salmon or tuna canned in oil) can add another 350 IUs or so - and a cup of ready-to-eat cereal can provide around 40 IUs.

Smart use of vitamin D supplements

As indicated by the numbers above, a vitamin D supplement is really the only realistic way to reach the higher levels suggested for adults. This is especially true in winter - when sun exposure is ineffective anywhere above the latitude of Atlanta, Georgia. Fortunately, vitamin D supplements (as 1000 IU capsules) are readily available, relatively inexpensive, and well absorbed. Vitamin D can be taken with or without food - alone or with a multi-vitamin/mineral supplement.