

A vitamin D-lightful summer

Summer is a time to soak up the sun. Sun rays are a primary source of vitamin D, an important tool for our body. Should you be concerned that you're getting too much or too little vitamin D? Experts say if you know your body and take the usual sun precautions, you should have a worry-free summer.

Vitamin D basics

Maddy Draper, APRN, a health care provider at OSF OnCall, says vitamin D is a nutrient our body needs to produce calcium. Calcium helps create strong teeth and bones. So logically, not having enough vitamin D leads to brittle bones (a risk for greater injury after a fall), plus muscle aches and pains. Others with a vitamin D deficiency may *not* show symptoms. Either way, a provider may order a blood test to confirm the issue and then may advise you to take a supplement. This is usually in pill form and can be prescribed or bought over the counter by itself or as part of a multivitamin.

"Or the provider may just talk about vitamin D-rich foods first before starting a supplement," Draper says. "High fat fishes, egg yolks, some cheeses and mushrooms."

Draper adds that pregnant women, babies (especially babies who are breastfed), the elderly and people with darker skin often lack vitamin D.

On the flip side, Draper says it's rare, but a person can get too much vitamin D. Symptoms include nausea, vomiting and heart palpitations (feeling like your heartbeat is fast, pounding or otherwise irregular). You may also suffer kidney damage.

Summer sun

Here's advice to commit to memory: Draper says research shows 10 to 15 minutes of sun exposure three times a day can get you a healthy amount of vitamin D.

"You want to protect your skin while doing that," Draper adds. "Sunscreen and protective clothing like a hat and sunglasses. There's not any research showing that sunscreen or clothes will prevent you from getting the vitamin D you need."

Experts say your sunscreen should have a sun protection factor (SPF) of 30 or higher, and you should reapply every two hours. Clothing should be lightweight and light colored (Dark colors absorb more sunlight, leading to quicker heat illness.) Stay hydrated, and watch for redness and blisters from sunburns and suspicious moles that may be skin cancer. See a provider right away if you have issues from getting too much sun.

Another thing to note: Experts say a specialized lamp can help with seasonal affective disorder, a mental health condition often seen in the winter due to decreased daylight. The same logic does *not* apply for vitamin D. You need natural, not artificial light to get the vitamin D you need.

The bottom line

Draper says most people don't have to worry about getting too much or too little vitamin D.

"The average person will get it through the sun," Draper says. "If you live in a cold and dark environment, you're at higher risk for vitamin D deficiency. People farther away from the equator are higher risk."

If you have symptoms of too much or too little vitamin D or just have a concern, talk to your primary care provider.