

Take Charge of Your Health: Get your *Vitamin D*



We've all heard reports that too much sun exposure can lead to skin cancer. But can too little sun be dangerous as well? Health experts say yes.

Too little sun can lead to vitamin D deficiency, a condition that can be dangerous, particularly for African Americans.

Vitamin D is produced in response to sun exposure. It is vital to your body's absorption of calcium. People with vitamin D deficiency are able to absorb only one-third as much calcium as those with sufficient levels. Calcium is needed to build strong bones and healthy muscles, so vitamin D is key to avoiding bone-softening diseases like rickets and osteoporosis. Current studies, however, show it can also lessen your risk for developing conditions such as cancer, diabetes and cardiovascular disease.

Yet geneticist Rick Kittles, an associate professor at the University of Chicago, warns that nearly 75 percent of African Americans are vitamin D insufficient.


"The brown-black pigment, which is in our skin and gives us eye color and hair color, is a protector of our skin cells from too much ultraviolet radiation," he says.

It is the ultraviolet radiation that is needed to produce vitamin D in the body. Thus darker-skinned people may need more than 20 times as much exposure to sunlight as those with fairer skin to produce the same amount of vitamin D.

What can you do to improve the level of vitamin D in your blood? First, a little bit of sun exposure goes a long way. As little as 10 minutes a few times a week can produce thousands of units of vitamin D. Slightly more time is required for those with darker skin.

Calcium supplements with vitamin D included are also available in your local drugstore, and there are a variety of foods that are a good source of vitamin D. Among these foods are fatty fish, such as salmon or mackerel, egg yolks, breakfast cereals, milk and some juices.

When in doubt, visit your physician. Kittles says your doctor can look at the breakdown of vitamin D in the blood and let you know if you are deficient. He or she can also make qualified recommendations on how improve your levels and thus take charge of your health and vitamin D levels.

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