

Spotlight on Health

Vitamin D Beyond Bone Health

Scientists have long known that we need vitamin D to keep our bones healthy. But they are now learning that vitamin D is not just important for bone health. They have done studies of people with other diseases. These studies have shown a link between vitamin D and other health conditions. In this newsletter we'll talk about how vitamin D is linked to heart disease, cancer, certain infections, and some autoimmune diseases.

Heart Disease

Our blood vessels and heart tissues have chemicals that bind vitamin D. This is a hint that vitamin D has some kind of function in these tissues. Scientists have learned that vitamin D helps keep platelets from sticking to blood vessel walls. It also decreases inflammation and helps keep blood pressure low. All these things are important for a healthy heart.

Does this mean people with low amounts of vitamin D in their blood are at risk for heart disease? They might be. Studies show that people with heart disease often have low amounts of vitamin D. But scientists don't know if the low amounts help cause heart disease. They also don't know if increasing vitamin D from a low amount to a higher amount will reduce the risk of getting heart disease.

Cancer

The story is similar for cancer. Chemicals that bind vitamin D have been found in the colon, breast, and prostate. These are fairly common sites for cancer. Vitamin D helps control many genes that are involved in cell growth, cell death, and the immune system. So vitamin D might help keep cells from growing out of control and forming a cancer. It might also help the immune system fight cancer.

Scientists have found that people with more vitamin D in their blood get cancer less often. But they don't know if raising vitamin D levels in the blood will reduce a person's risk for cancer.

Infectious Diseases

Chemicals that bind vitamin D are found in immune cells and cells in the lungs. So scientists have looked for links between vitamin D and infections that affect the lungs. These include the common cold and flu, pneumonia, and tuberculosis (TB). Scientists found that low levels of vitamin D are linked to a higher risk for these infections. They don't know yet if higher amounts of vitamin D will help keep a person from getting these illnesses. They also don't know if vitamin D can help a sick person feel better.



People at Risk for Vitamin D Deficiency

- People who do not get enough sunlight
- People with dark skin
- Breast-fed infants
- Older adults
- Obese people
- People who have had gastric bypass surgery
- People who have certain medical conditions
- People taking certain medications

If you are one of these people, talk with your doctor. He or she might want to do a blood test to find out if you have enough vitamin D in your blood.

Autoimmune Diseases

As mentioned before, chemicals that bind vitamin D are found in immune cells. Some of these cells produce antibodies that help keep the body healthy. But in autoimmune disease, the antibodies harm the body instead.

Scientists have found a link between vitamin D and certain autoimmune diseases. You may have heard of some of them. They include:

- Antiphospholipid syndrome
- Autoimmune thyroiditis
- Crohn disease
- Multiple sclerosis (MS)
- Primary biliary cirrhosis
- Rheumatoid arthritis
- Sjögren syndrome
- Systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE)
- Type 1 diabetes

At this time, scientists don't know if an autoimmune disease can cause low levels of vitamin D. Nor do they know if vitamin D plays a role in the development of the disease. Some scientists think that getting more vitamin D might help prevent 2 kinds of autoimmune disease: type 1 diabetes and multiple sclerosis.

In Summary

Scientists know for sure that getting enough vitamin D is important for healthy bones. It can keep people from getting bone disease. It can also be used to treat people who have bone disease.

Although there is still a lot to learn, it now looks like vitamin D is linked to other health conditions, too. These include heart disease, cancer, certain infections, and some autoimmune diseases. More studies are needed to know how important these links are. But in the meantime, make sure you get enough vitamin D to maintain overall good health.

How to Get Enough Vitamin D

Vitamin D is called the sunshine vitamin. Your skin can make all the vitamin D you need if it gets enough sunshine. So let your bare skin get a little sun.

You can also get some vitamin D from food (see list below). It's hard to get all the vitamin D your body needs from food, though. This is true even if you eat food fortified with vitamin D.

A third way to get vitamin D is by taking supplements. It's possible to get all the vitamin D you need from supplements.

Be sure to talk with your doctor about how much vitamin D you need and the best way to get it.

Foods with Vitamin D

- Swordfish
- Salmon
- Tuna fish
- Egg yolk
- Orange juice
- Milk
- Yogurt
- Ready-to-eat cereal