

# Are you getting enough Vitamin D?



Contributed by Stephanie Scott ANutr – Food and Health Development Worker, Edinburgh Community Food

Vitamin D may be a hugely important vitamin for our health. There is a lot of exciting research being done on the various potential benefits of this hard-to-get vitamin but what we do know without doubt is that D is vital for helping to keep our bones and teeth strong. As we move into summer and are (hopefully) enjoying some sunshine we should be aware of the importance of vitamin D and building up our bodies' stores of it.

*What is vitamin D and why is it important?*

Vitamin D is a fat soluble vitamin which means that it is found in the fat content of a small number of foods, most notably oily fish and dairy foods. Unlike with water-soluble vitamins, any vitamin D that your body does not need right away is stored for future use. It's an essential nutrient that has many important functions in the body, from replicating DNA, helping our immune systems to making sure we have stable levels of calcium in our bodies. It also helps us absorb calcium and, as you are no doubt aware, it is calcium which keeps our bones and teeth healthy. Without it, we risk our bones becoming soft or fragile. With osteoporosis (and hip fractures) being very common amongst older women and with childhood rickets making a come back in Scotland we need to make sure we're getting enough vitamin D.

*Who is at risk?*

A significant proportion of the UK population has low vitamin D levels. Those of us most at risk are: children under the age

of five, pregnant and breastfeeding women, the over 65s, those with darker skin and people with limited exposure to sunlight, such as those who cover up for cultural reasons or who are largely housebound. And as we shall see, making sure we get plenty of D isn't the easiest thing to do!

*How do we get enough vitamin D?*

The recommended daily vitamin D intake for adults is a modest 10 micrograms/day. However, average daily intakes of vitamin D from food are a paltry 2-4 micrograms /day!

Vitamin D is found in small amounts in a few foods, such as oily fish like mackerel or salmon, eggs, liver, fortified fat spreads, fortified cereals and dairy. It is important that all of us – especially those of us at risk of deficiency – try to include these foods in our daily diets. But, while there is some D in some foods, the main source is the sun.

Our bodies are able to create the majority of vitamin D that we need through exposure to sunlight. And by this we mean strong summer sun on uncovered skin. Getting out into the sun little and often can be a good way to help build up our stores. While sunblock prevents us from making D it is important to remember that prolonged sun exposure without protection increases the risk of skin cancer. We should try to make sure that when out in the sun we take care to cover up or apply sunscreen before skin becomes red or starts to burn. It is, however, a bit of a balancing act. NHS Health Scotland admits: "10-15 minutes of unprotected Scottish sun exposure is safe for all. However, this may not be sufficient to make vitamin D".

This though assumes that we get some sun! With our 'glorious' cloudy weather there often isn't too much about. In fact, Glasgow has the same amount of useful sunshine as the Arctic Circle and while Edinburgh is a little better the sun is only really strong enough to give us D between the months of April – September and during the middle of the day.

Despite this we need to try as best we can to build up our stores of vitamin D over the summer months to keep us going as far through the winter as possible, topping them up with the food sources of D. The NHS recommends that those at risk of deficiency take a supplement. For further information and before taking any supplements please speak to your pharmacist or GP.

- Try to eat as much oily fish, eggs and dairy as you can
  - Catch as much sunshine as possible (without burning!)
  - Speak to your GP about supplementation
  - New parent? Ask your doctor or health visitor about Healthy Start Vitamins eligibility for your child.
- <http://www.healthystart.nhs.uk/healthy-start-vouchers/healthy-start-vitamins/>

Submitted by [Stephanie Scott](#)

