- Vitamins

DIETITIAN'S DIARY

The sunshine vitamin



Our resident dietitian Emily Angus explains why we should all be making the most of the summer sun

As spring turns to summer, I thought it seemed like a good time to refresh our knowledge on vitamin D, also known as the 'sunshine vitamin'. Vitamin D is slightly different to other essential vitamins and minerals because, as well as consuming it through our diets, we can produce it in our skin through the action of UV light. After production, this newly formed vitamin D is activated by our liver and kidneys.

THE ROLE OF VITAMIN D

Activated vitamin D acts like a hormone in many ways, regulating several cellular processes in our bodies. It is essential for bone health because it promotes the absorption of dietary calcium by our small intestine, helps to regulate the levels of calcium and phosphate in our blood, and interacts with cells that are involved in bone remodelling and growth. When we don't get enough vitamin D, our bones can become brittle and lose strength, increasing the risk of osteoporosis.

Other benefits of this essential vitamin include immune system support, the maintenance of muscle function and the regulation of inflammation.

HOW MUCH DO WE NEED?

In much of the Northern Hemisphere, the sunlight is not strong enough for us to produce vitamin D in our skin

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between October and March. With this in mind, we need to ensure that we are getting a consistent intake from our diets or via a supplement.

Children over one year old and adults have a daily requirement of 10mcg, and in the UK it is recommended that everyone takes a supplement during the autumn and winter months as a minimum.

Some people should consider taking a daily supplement year-round due to increased risk of vitamin D deficiency. This includes:

- Infants under the age of five who drink less than 500ml of formula each day.
- People who have limited sun exposure due to spending extended time indoors or covering their skin when outside.
- People with darker skin, as melanin reduces the production of vitamin D in the skin.
- Older adults, as the efficiency of vitamin D production reduces with age.
- People with medical conditions that limit fat absorption, such as coeliac disease, ulcerative colitis or after bariatric surgery.

If you choose to expose your skin to sunlight for vitamin D production in the spring and summer, it is important to protect your skin from burning. Make sure you spend short periods of time in the sun and avoid direct exposure in the middle of the day (11am-3pm).



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VITAMIN D AND VEGAN DIETS

Getting enough vitamin D without fortified foods is considered difficult no matter what your dietary pattern is. While vitamin D is not abundant in plant foods, vegans can obtain it through fortified foods, such as plant-based dairy alternatives, or by taking a supplement. I meet my needs through a combination of both – I take a VEG 1 multivitamin (available from vegansociety.com/shop) and include fortified soya milk in my daily diet for both the calcium and vitamin D.

When choosing a supplement, be aware that some types of vitamin D are not suitable for vegans. Vitamin D2 is never derived from animals, but vitamin D3 can be derived from either lichen, which is vegan-friendly, or from the lanolin found in sheep's wool. If you're unsure, look for the Vegan Trademark.



BOOSTING YOUR ABSORPTION

As vitamin D is a fat-soluble vitamin, you can help your body to absorb this nutrient by taking your supplement alongside a meal or snack containing fat. Healthy fat sources include nuts and seeds and their butters, avocado and vegetable oils. Enjoy the sunshine!

ARE YOU GETTING ENOUGH?

If you live in the UK, it is recommended that you take a supplement containing vitamin D from October to March as a minimum.

Fortified foods such as plant-based dairy alternatives, spreads and breakfast cereals can also contribute towards your vitamin D intake.

Not all added vitamin D is suitable for vegans, so look for The Vegan Trademark or contact the product manufacturers for more information.

You can increase your absorption of vitamin D by having it alongside a source of healthy fats.

*Note that this article is for general advice only; please speak with your healthcare provider if you have any concerns about your individual vitamin D status or individual supplementation needs.



For more information, head to vegansociety.com/nutrition and check out the vitamin D nutrient web page.

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