

Vitamin D – Information for Patients

Why is vitamin D important?

Vitamin D is essential for healthy bones and teeth.

How will it affect me if I have a shortage of vitamin D?

A lack of vitamin D can lead to bone deformities such as rickets in children, and bone pain and tenderness as a result of a condition called osteomalacia in adults.

How can I increase my vitamin D level?

We get most of our vitamin D from sunlight. Our bodies make vitamin D when our skin is exposed to summer sunlight so during the winter months it can be particularly difficult to get enough. During the winter, we get vitamin D from our body's stores and from food sources.

The amount of time you need in the sun to make enough vitamin D is different for everyone. Most people will make enough vitamin D if they have a short daily period of sun exposure with their forearms, hands or lower legs uncovered and without sunscreen during the summer months (April to October), mostly between 11am and 3pm. Exposing yourself for longer is unlikely to provide any additional benefits.

People with darker skin may need to spend longer in the sun to produce the same amount of vitamin D.

Children aged under six months should be kept out of direct strong sunlight.

From March to October in the UK, children should: cover up with suitable clothing; spend time in the shade (particularly from 11am to 3pm); wear at least sun protection factor (SPF) 15 sunscreen.

The longer you stay in the sun, especially for long periods without sun protection, the greater the risk of skin cancer. You should always take care to cover up or apply sunscreen (SPF at least 15) before any exposed skin becomes red or begins to burn.

Which foods contain Vitamin D?

It is difficult to get enough vitamin D from food alone. However, it is found naturally in: **Oily fish such as salmon, mackerel, trout and sardines, eggs, meat**

Some foods, such as some breakfast cereals, soya products, some dairy products, powdered milks and margarines, have vitamin D added to them. The amounts added to these products can vary and it can often be only in small amounts.

Manufacturers have to add vitamin D to infant formula.

How much vitamin D do I need?

Advice for adults and children over five years old

Everyone including pregnant and breastfeeding women, should consider taking a daily supplement containing 10 micrograms (mcg) (equivalent to 400IU) of vitamin D, particularly during the winter months (October to end of March). From late March/early April to September most should be able to get enough vitamin D from sunlight, so they may choose not to take a vitamin D supplement during these months.

Groups who may be at additional risk of low levels of vitamin D are recommended to consider taking daily supplementation throughout the year (see overleaf).

Advice for infants and young children

Breastfed babies from birth to one year of age should be given a daily supplement containing 8.5 to 10mcg (340 to 400IU) of vitamin D.

Babies fed infant formula should not be given a vitamin D supplement until they are receiving less than 500ml (about a pint) of infant formula a day.

Children aged 1 to 4 years old should be given a daily supplement containing 10mcg (400IU) of vitamin D.

Advice for groups who may be at additional risk of low levels of Vitamin D

People who have low or no exposure to the sun e.g. those who are frail or housebound; are in an institution such as a care home; usually wear clothes that cover up most of their skin when outdoors; people who regularly use high-factor sunscreen. *These people should take a daily supplement containing 10mcg of vitamin D throughout the year.*

People from minority ethnic groups with dark skin, such as those of African, African-Caribbean or South Asian origin, might not get enough vitamin D from sunlight. *These people should consider taking a daily supplement containing 10mcg of vitamin D throughout the year.*

There will be other groups who might be at risk of low vitamin D levels. If you are not sure whether you are at risk of vitamin D deficiency, or don't know which supplements to take, speak to your **pharmacist, GP, midwife or healthvisitor**.

Vitamin D Supplements

You can buy single vitamin D supplements or vitamin drops containing vitamin D (for use by under-fives) at most pharmacies, health food shops and supermarkets. Your local pharmacist can advise you as to the best product for you.

Low dose vitamin D supplements will not routinely be prescribed by your doctor.

Healthy Start vitamins

Healthy start vitamins are vitamin supplements that contain vitamin D. They are recommended for pregnant women, women up to 1 year after delivery of baby and children under 5 years old.

Where do I get Healthy Start vitamins?

Healthy Start vitamins are available free of charge to pregnant and breastfeeding women and children under 5 years old, from children's centres throughout Hertfordshire.

To find your nearest children's centre go to: www.hertsdirect.org/childrenscentres

For further information visit www.healthystart.nhs.uk

Information in other languages

Information on Vitamin D in other languages is available on the NHS choices website at: <http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/vitamins-minerals/Pages/Vitamin-D.aspx> (click the 'Translate' link at the top of the page and select language).