



Wellness Matters

Vitamin D Deficiency — the Tip of the Iceberg

The warm summer sun may be a distant memory, but the lack of sunshine means a lack of vitamin D which is fast becoming a global pandemic.

It has been estimated that 1 billion people worldwide have vitamin D deficiency or insufficiency. The main causes are attributed to: long winters, lifestyle (living indoors), cultural habits (fully covering body), dark / black skin (more packed melanocytes preventing sun penetration). Other causes of malabsorption are medication such as carbamazepine, phenytoin, primidone and barbiturates. This includes bowel disease such as coeliac disease, Crohn's and cystic fibrosis or a gastric bypass.

Why Should You Be Concerned about Vitamin D Deficiency?

Vitamin D deficiency is now very common amongst children and adults and is linked to many health issues. Without vitamin D, only 10 to 15% of dietary calcium and about 60% of phosphorus is absorbed. Deficiencies of calcium and vitamin D prevent the maximum deposition of calcium in the skeleton. Therefore, lack of vitamin D causes growth retardation and skeletal deformities during pregnancy and in children. Breast milk is low in vitamin D, so babies need supplementation. In adults it is the common cause for osteomalacia (softening of the bones), osteopenia (reduced mineral content in bones) and osteoarthritis.

The following symptoms may be present if vitamin D is low: hair loss, feeling exhausted and unrested, brain fog, low mood and SAD (seasonal affective disorder). Vitamin D deficiency causes muscle weakness. Imagine your bone softening and starting to bend which exerts a pull on your muscles. One study showed that 93% of persons 10 to 65 years of age who had muscle aches and bone pain and diagnosed with fibromyalgia, chronic fatigue syndrome, and depression, were actually vitamin D deficient.



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In children, lack of vitamin D causes: muscle cramps and spasms, seizures and breathing difficulties, soft skull and leg bones (legs might look curved/bow-legged), younger children might be reluctant to walk, tooth delay, irritability, proneness to infections or slow recovery, respiratory (chest) symptoms and, in severe cases, breathing difficulty due to weak chest muscles and soft ribcages. Adults can suffer the same symptoms but most common is general vague aches and pains and a sense of not being well.

What Should You Do?

Ideally you should get exposure to sun little and often without sun block. However, in winter months we **ALL** should supplement with vitamin D for life. There are food sources but not as effective as supplements. Two types exist: vitamin D2 (ergocalciferol) and vitamin D3 (cholecalciferol). Vitamin D3 is preferred because it is naturally occurring and raises the levels more effectively. D2 is recommended for strict vegans as it is derived from plant sources. Sprays and tablets are available from pharmacies or health food stores; the spray is a more effective treatment as it is absorbed straight into the blood stream however it is important to ensure you are taking the correct dose.

For more information discuss your dose with a local pharmacist or see NICE guidelines for vitamin D deficiency in children and adults. If you have severe symptoms contact your GP.

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