

Vitamin D - essential to feeling and functioning better

Written by Nicole Winbush MD
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Good whole foods are the best sources for health giving vitamins and nutrients. However, there are some important nutrients that can be very difficult to obtain even when eating a healthy diet. Vitamin D is one of them. This is why I recommend this supplement to all of my patients. Numerous studies have documented low levels of Vitamin D among many Americans, and it is estimated that 80% of African-American adults are deficient in Vitamin D! Why does this matter? Have you ever had body pain, bone pain or joint pain and no one can find a cause? It could be low levels of vitamin D (which is actually a hormone) as it is a frequent cause of bone and joint pain.

One of the biggest ways to obtain Vitamin D has nothing to do with food. This source is the sun. Exposure to sunlight on your skin causes the production of active Vitamin D (clothes block this process). Individuals with more deeply pigmented skin are at increased risk for Vitamin D deficiency as their additional skin pigment (melanin) blocks some of the sun's rays from penetrating their skin and producing vitamin D. Also, living in more Northern parts of the world and spending more time indoors can contribute to low levels of Vitamin D. There are very few sources of vitamin D in the diet - these include fatty fish raised in the wild (such as mackerel, herring, sardines and salmon), eggs and dairy products that are fortified with Vitamin D.

Low levels of vitamin D are now associated with a number of other often serious health conditions. Studies have shown that low levels of Vitamin D are associated with increased risk of several cancers including: prostate, breast and colon cancer. All of these are cancers that have a higher presence and death rate among African-Americans. Could it be that the high rate of Vitamin D deficiency has something to do with this? This is possible, although additional studies are needed. Research also suggests that Vitamin D may play a role in preventing diabetes and in improved blood pressure control.

Do your bones or joints ache? If you press the front of your shin does it hurt? Get your vitamin D level checked. If your level is low, ask your healthcare provider about taking a supplement to get back into the normal range. Many symptoms of achy bones and joints will improve with supplementation. There is some debate as to what is a normal level of Vitamin D. The level of 30 (nmol/L) is okay for bone health. However, some researchers believe that for best body functioning your level should be higher, around 50. If your level is very low, a supplement can get the level back into the normal range. Once you are back in the normal range, you will need to continue taking the supplement in a smaller dosage. Your body will need calcium to absorb vitamin D. Calcium is best for your body if it comes in the form of food, a supplement is second best. (see my website for good sources of dietary calcium)

For optimal health get sunlight exposure - approximately 15-30 minutes of midday sun on your arms and legs is generally safe (unless you are at high risk for skin cancer) and supports vitamin D levels. Take your supplement even in the summer. Your body will adjust the amount of Vitamin D that is produced by the skin and turn off production when there is enough.

Our bodies are complex, Vitamin D is not the only factor in the illnesses we discussed. Low levels of vitamin D and other nutrients may warn you of overall poor health status that increase your risk of ill health. We all have the power to change our nutrition and by doing so, impact many aspects of our health. With Vitamin D supplementation, you can start today.

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Dr. Winbush is a family physician practicing at NorthPoint Health and Wellness Center. She has a strong interest in wellness and patient education to help individuals feel empowered to optimize their health and functioning. For more information, to leave suggestions for future articles and additional resources visit www.functionwellmedicine.com .