



Soak up some sun -- and some vitamin D

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By Kathleen Longcore
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This summer, Linda Zimmermann has been making D while the sun shines -- vitamin D, that is. The Cascade Township woman is soaking in the "sunshine vitamin" to help eliminate chronic pain that was once so bad she could barely walk. Last year, Zimmermann had so much joint and muscle pain she needed injections just to function.

"It used to be when I walked, my feet hurt, my back hurt, everything hurt," said Zimmermann, the grandmother of nine. Her doctor, aware of studies linking this type of pain to a vitamin D deficiency, prescribed vitamin supplements and sunshine, because the body manufactures and stores vitamin D when the skin is exposed to the sun's rays.

"I started on vitamin D in February, and it has made a huge difference in my life," Zimmermann said. She now walks pain-free and is enjoying active fun with her grandkids this summer.

A recent study by **Michigan Pain Consultants** in Grand Rapids echoed findings from a Mayo Clinic study that linked a vitamin D deficiency to joint and muscle pain. The Grand Rapids study is published this month in the Journal of Practical Pain Management.

"Vitamin D deficiency is a striking health-care menace," said **Dr. Mark Gostine**, president of the pain specialty group. Gostine said the Grand Rapids study included a cross-section of patients who were referred for treatment of neck pain, back pain, headaches and fibromyalgia.

Nutritional therapy alone, including vitamin D, helped all but those whose pain was caused by a structural problem, he said. Doctors say it is nearly impossible to get all the vitamin D we need from food. So nearly everyone must rely on some help from the vitamin bottle and sun exposure.

Those at high risk for skin cancers or whose medications warn against being in the sun may have to rely on vitamin supplements alone.

The benefits of the "sunshine vitamin" -- the vitamin older generations got from daily doses of cod liver oil -- go far beyond the maintenance of healthy teeth and bones.

Doctors now know D, which acts more like a hormone than a vitamin, plays an important role in keeping the immune system strong. A recent study at UCLA showed that vitamin D might act in the body like a potent antibiotic, increasing the production of peptides that destroy the cell walls of viruses and bacteria.

Research has shown that vitamin D deficiency is common among dark-skinned people, the elderly and those in northern states in spite of D-fortified milk and cereals.

Doctors blame the deficiency on an indoors lifestyle, the drinking of beverages other than milk and skin cancer fears, which have led to widespread use of sunscreen.

The deficiency puts people at risk for many disorders, including depression, osteoporosis, colon polyps, heart disease, multiple sclerosis, rheumatoid arthritis, certain types of cancer and unexplained musculoskeletal pain.

Many adults in northern states complain of chronic bone and joint pain in the winter, said Dr. James R. Ellis, a Grand Rapids rehabilitation specialist.

Ellis said he began seeing data linking pain with a D deficiency two years ago. "In the Mayo Clinic study, almost every person they checked in the winter time was vitamin D deficient, and this was kind of a light bulb."

It explained the increase in patients Ellis was seeing with joint and muscle pain from December to March.

"There clearly are a lot of patients who come out of the woodwork in the winter," when there is little sunshine, he said.

Gostine is so impressed with the protective effect of vitamin D, he is prescribing as much as 2,000 units a day, and he tells patients to get 30 minutes of sun every day, if possible.

This flies in the face of warnings from dermatologists who have seen a huge increase in skin cancers.

However, Gostine said a short period in the sun each day will not dramatically increase the risk of skin cancer for most people. "And the net effect will be a positive one."

That's because vitamin D affects more body functions than doctors once thought.

And that is why in 2007 the National Institutes of Health probably will boost the recommended daily intake of this vitamin from 200 to 600 units a day to as much as 1,200 units a day.

Since vitamin D stores itself in the body, it is wise to consult a doctor about how much to take to avoid the danger of overdosing.

Send e-mail to the author: yourlife@grpress.com