

Psychiatrist Michael Yasinski M.D. on the impact of vitamin D on one's health and well-being.



Nobody in the Valley of the Sun should have a reason for being low on vitamin D; however, it is actually quite common, even here in Arizona. What exactly makes vitamin D so important to our health? Quite simply, it directly and indirectly influences most of what happens in our bodies every second of every day.

First, vitamin D isn't actually a vitamin. Rather, it's a hormone precursor that our biological ancestors made from being in the sun. When exposed to UV rays, a chemical reaction in the skin creates vitamin D, which travels to the liver and is changed to the active form of vitamin D and plays a key role in the activation of thousands of genes involved in keeping both the mind and body operating at peak health.

In addition to the well-known benefits on bone health, the evidence is particularly strong when it comes to vitamin D's role in treating depression, strengthening immunity and reducing cancer risks. If you feel sluggish, struggle with concentration or feel depressed, consider spending 10 to 15 minutes in the sun, at least three days per week. Now that summer is here, many of us avoid the sun at almost any cost—slathering on sunscreen or staying in the shade—which can make you susceptible to low vitamin D levels.

Vitamin D helps elevate your mood, both if you are severely depressed or mildly depressed. It also is crucial for cognitive function, memory and attention. The effects have been comparable to anti-depressant drugs in some studies but without the unwanted side effects they often have.

Another lesser known benefit of vitamin D is its cancer-fighting properties. Vitamin D can combat many types of cancer, especially in older women. One study showed plentiful vitamin D reduced multiple types of cancer by 60 percent in older women. However, benefits for both men and women of all ages exist.

Do you struggle with constantly fighting a cold? Vitamin D may be your answer as it strengthens the immune system and wards off colds and infections. Numerous immune compounds depend on vitamin D, including crucial components that activate immune cells. The vitamin D then turns on genes involved in immunity and boosts levels of powerful germ-fighting compounds, especially in the respiratory system

So does everyone need more vitamin D? Not necessarily. However, it only takes 15 minutes in the sun without sunblock, three or four times per week, to attain the majority of the benefits of vitamin D. Given the sun carries its own risks, especially if you are taking certain medications, talk to your doctor before spending more time outside this summer.

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