

# Vitamin D and you





## Why is vitamin D important?

Vitamin D is an essential vitamin for everyone. It is important for bone and muscle health and may also have a role in the body's immune response to respiratory viruses. Babies and young children who don't get enough vitamin D before they are born or in their early lives can be at risk of developing rickets, which causes weak and badly formed bones.

Adults and older people who don't have enough vitamin D can develop a condition where the bones become soft and there is a greater risk of broken bones (known as osteomalacia).

## How do we get vitamin D?

We get vitamin D from three main sources:

- **Food:** small amounts of vitamin D are found naturally in fresh and tinned oily fish (such as salmon, mackerel, trout, kippers and sardines), eggs and meat. Some foods have vitamin D added to them, including margarine, some breakfast cereals, dairy products such as cheese and yogurts, dairy free alternatives such as soya or oat milk, powdered milks, including infant formulas and low-fat spreads (amounts in these products vary and are often quite small).

- **Sunlight:** Our bodies can make most of the vitamin D we need from sunlight on our skin during the 'summer' months (between late March/early April to the end of September). However, if you are out in the sun, take care to cover up or use sunscreen before you turn red or get burnt. In the autumn and winter months (October to the end of March) sunlight is not strong enough to make vitamin D.
- **Vitamin D supplements:** Many of us need more vitamin D than we can expect to get from food and sunlight, especially during the autumn and winter months. Therefore, we should consider taking a daily supplement containing 10 micrograms (also written as mcg or µg) of vitamin D.

## Who needs extra Vitamin D?

Daily vitamin D supplements (10 micrograms) are recommended all year round for the following groups:

- **pregnant and breastfeeding women;**
- **breastfed babies from birth;**
- **babies who get less than 500ml (about a pint) of infant formula a day** (because infant formula has vitamin D added);
- **infants and children aged 1 to 5 years;**
- **people aged over 65 years;**
- **people who have low or no exposure to the sun, for example those who cover their skin for cultural reasons, who are housebound or confined indoors for long periods;**
- **people with dark skin, for example people of African, Afro-Caribbean or South Asian family origin.**



## What about everyone else?

Everyone aged 5 years and over should consider taking a 10 microgram supplement during the autumn and winter months.

During the summer months (late March/April to the end of September), most people will usually get enough vitamin D from sunlight, so you may choose not to take a supplement over the summer.

## Where do we get vitamin D supplements?

You can buy supplements of vitamin D from your local pharmacist or supermarket. Note that supplement manufacturers differ in the amount of vitamin contained in each dose or capsule/tablet so choose one that is as close to the recommended daily amount as possible, without exceeding it. Parents who have children under 4 years or those who are pregnant and on benefits or pregnant and under 18 are entitled to Healthy Start vouchers.

Visit **[www.healthystart.nhs.uk](http://www.healthystart.nhs.uk)** or ask a health professional for more information.

Healthy Start vitamins should also be available for purchase at most pharmacies for families not covered by the scheme.

For older adults, vitamin D with added calcium may be recommended by healthcare staff to protect bone health and guard against osteoporosis.

If you have particular dietary needs (for example, if you avoid nuts, are vegan or have a halal or kosher diet), you will be able to get supplements suited to your needs.

If you are not sure which supplements to take, ask your pharmacist, GP or health visitor for advice.

## Is it possible to take too much vitamin D?

Although the skin will not make too much vitamin D from exposure to the sun, it is possible to take too much from supplements and this can be harmful over time. The only way to take too much vitamin D is through supplements.

It is important to take (or give your child) a supplement containing no more than the recommended amount of vitamin D. You should not take (or give) more than this unless advised to do so by a doctor.



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