

What is vitamin D?

Vitamin D helps the body to absorb calcium and phosphorus, which are essential for bone development. As well, it's important for muscle development, as impaired muscle function can lead to accidents and falls, particularly in older people. A year-long study of 1231 adults aged 65 years or older found that those deficient in vitamin D were 78 percent more likely than people with adequate levels to have at least two falls.

Other studies are finding that it may have wider health benefits such as helping prevent cancers of the breast, colon, and prostate. It may also help reduce the risk of diabetes, hypertension, and multiple sclerosis, and slow the progression of osteoarthritis.

Over ninety percent of our daily vitamin D requirement is provided by the action of sunlight on the skin: UV (ultra-violet) radiation penetrates the skin and activates a precursor of vitamin D. Some foods contain vitamin D - the main sources are oily fish (like salmon and sardines).

- The best way to boost your vitamin D is to get out and about during the winter - go for a walk at lunchtime when UV levels are highest. But always wear a sunscreen when skiing - UV levels are much higher at high altitudes.
- Talk to a health professional before taking a vitamin D supplement. Although it is difficult to actually get too much vitamin D, it is harmful in very high doses - the side effects range from nausea and weakness to kidney and heart failure.
- Don't use the health benefits of vitamin D as an excuse for getting a tan in summer - skin cancer is a major health hazard. Vitamin D is made most efficiently by brief, frequent sun exposures. It is broken down by too much sun.