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Sunlight Therapy

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Appropriate sunlight exposure protects against a number of diseases.



Sunshine improves your mental and physical health.

Sunlight Therapy

BY WINSTON J. CRAIG

Adequate sunlight provides many healthful benefits. Sunshine can lift the human spirit and help fight off depression, especially during the short days of winter. A lack of sunlight is considered a major cause of seasonal affective disorder. For recovering surgical patients, sunlight is also therapeutic. Less pain medication is required by those exposed to plenty of sunlight.

For many people, sun exposure is a major source of vitamin D. It is estimated that about 50 percent of Americans are vitamin D deficient. Very few foods contain the sunshine vitamin, and foods that are fortified with vitamin D are typically inadequate to fully satisfy our vitamin D requirement. Vitamin D deficiency increases the risk of bone fractures and has other negative health consequences.



Adequate vitamin D levels are important for the prevention of cancer, especially breast, prostate and colorectal. Studies in Australia, the UK and USA revealed that decreased sun exposure correlated with higher rates of prostate cancer. Improvement of vitamin D status through sun exposure and an increased intake of a vitamin D-fortified diet led subjects to an improved cardiometabolic profile with an improvement of HDL cholesterol levels, triglycerides and blood pressure levels. Low vitamin D status also has been linked to higher risk of hypertension, and to cardiovascular, cancer and all-cause mortality.

Vitamin D modulates the activity of T and B lymphocytes. Vitamin D-deficient persons are more likely to suffer autoimmune diseases such as multiple sclerosis and rheumatoid arthritis. Vitamin D deficiency is a predictor of childhood asthma and the development of Type 1 diabetes. A study in postmenopausal women who took 2,000 IU (International Unit) of vitamin D a day had a 90 percent

reduction in upper respiratory tract infections compared to women who took 400 IU a day.

Modest amounts of vitamin D are found in sun-dried mushrooms and in fortified foods, such as milk, soy milk, rice and almond milk, breakfast cereals, and orange juice. Fifteen minutes of bright sunlight on the arms and legs two to three times per week, between the hours of about 10 a.m. and 3 p.m. in the late spring, summer and early fall, are normally sufficient for

the body to make adequate vitamin D to meet one's needs. However, from November to March, people living in the Great Lakes area are unable to manufacture vitamin D from sunlight, and a daily supplement of 1,000 IU may be needed. Higher levels of vitamin D supplements (5,000 to 10,000 IU per day for months) may be toxic.

Excessive sun exposure can accelerate aging of the skin, and produce skin cancer; however, sunscreen with an SPF of 15 will decrease your ability to make vitamin D by 99 percent. Sun protection should be worn on your face because it is easily sun-damaged. The elderly are at increased risk of D deficiency since vitamin D production by age 70 is only 30 percent of what it was at age 25. Vitamin D promotes better muscle function and stronger muscles, which reduce the risk of falls in the elderly.

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