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Wednesday, November 18, 2009

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November 16, 2009, 11:22 am

Vitamin D Shows Heart Benefits in Study

By [RONI CARYN RABIN](#)



Matthew Staver for The New York Times Vitamin D lowered the risk of heart disease in a new study.

Got vitamin D? It may protect you from heart disease.

Vitamin D, of milk fame, is known for helping with calcium absorption and for building strong bones, which is why it's routinely added to milk. But there is [more and more evidence that vitamin D is a critical player](#) in numerous other aspects of metabolism. A new study suggests many Americans aren't getting anywhere nearly enough of the vitamin, and it may be affecting their heart health.

In the study, researchers looked at tens of thousands of healthy adults 50 and older whose vitamin D levels had been measured during routine checkups. A majority, they found, were deficient in the vitamin. About two-thirds had less vitamin D in their bloodstreams than the authors considered healthy, and many were extremely deficient.

Less than two years later, the researchers found, those who had extremely low levels of the vitamin were almost twice as likely to have died or suffered a stroke than those with adequate amounts. They also had more coronary artery disease and were twice as likely to have developed heart failure.

The findings, which are being presented today at an American Heart Association conference in Orlando, don't prove that lack of vitamin D causes heart disease; they only suggest a link between the two. But cardiologists are starting to pay increasing attention because of what they're learning about vitamin D's roles in regulating blood pressure,

inflammation and glucose control — all critical body processes in cardiovascular health.

Earlier experiments in mice that were genetically altered not to respond to vitamin D found that the animals developed high blood pressure and a heart condition called left ventricular hypertrophy. And population studies of humans found higher rates of coronary heart disease and hypertension the further people live from the equator. Vitamin D deficiency is rare in tropical settings because of the strong sunlight, which promotes creation of the vitamin in the skin.

“What we were taught in medical school about vitamin D is that it’s associated with rickets and calcium metabolism,” said Dr. Joseph B. Muhlestein, a researcher with Intermountain Medical Center in Murray, Utah, and one of the authors of the new study. “We cardiologists didn’t worry about it; and we certainly didn’t order vitamin D levels.”

That, however, is changing. “What’s been discovered in the last few years is a significantly greater role for vitamin D,” Dr. Muhlestein said. “There are perhaps 200 different important metabolic processes that use vitamin D as a co-factor.”

The study involved 27,686 patients at the Intermountain Medical Center based in Salt Lake City. Low tobacco and alcohol use rates in that patient population made it easier for researchers to focus on the effects of vitamin D on heart health.

Patients were divided into three groups based on their vitamin D levels: “normal,” for those who had over 30 nanograms per milliliter of blood, “low” for those with levels of 15 to 30, and “very low” for those with levels less than 15.

Those with the lowest vitamin D levels were 77 percent more likely to die during the follow-up, 78 percent more likely to have a stroke and 45 percent more likely to develop coronary artery disease than those with normal levels. They were twice as likely to develop heart failure as those with normal levels. And even those who had moderate deficiencies were at higher risk, the researchers said.

People who were vitamin D deficient were also twice as likely to have diabetes and tended to have more high blood pressure. But being vitamin D deficient was an independent risk factor for poor outcomes, regardless of other risk factors like diabetes, Dr. Muhlestein said.

The next step for researchers is to figure out whether vitamin D deficiency actually causes disease. It’s possible that people who already have an underlying illness spend more time indoors and aren’t exposed to the sun, where they can absorb vitamin D through the skin. It’s also possible that disease processes already under way may affect vitamin D levels.

A clinical trial that randomly assigns participants to take vitamin D supplements or a placebo might be the next step, Dr. Muhlestein said. Researchers at Harvard and Brigham and Women’s Hospital are starting a large trial in January that will test the effects of vitamin D and omega-3 fatty acid supplements on men and women in their 60s.

Dr. Thomas Wang, an associate professor of medicine at Harvard who published an earlier trial on vitamin D deficiency and heart disease, said that whether treating vitamin D deficiency will have a beneficial effect on heart health is still an open question.

“If that does turn out to be the case, it would have pretty profound public health implications,” he said. “Vitamin D deficiency is very common in this country and other developed countries in northern latitudes, where people don’t get much sunlight and spend most of their time indoors.”

Doctors warn that anyone concerned about vitamin D levels should check with a doctor and have blood tests run. Vitamin D supplements are inexpensive and sold over the counter, but excessive amounts of vitamin D can be toxic.

The Institute of Medicine recommends adults under 50 who aren’t getting vitamin D from the sun get 200 international units of vitamin D a day, and that those 50 to 70 get 400 I.U. a day. Elderly people need even more. There is some controversy, however, over optimal amounts. Many doctors are advising their patients to take much higher amounts, such as 1,000 I.U. a day. The American Academy of Pediatrics has already increased its recommendation for supplementing breastfeeding infants to 400 I.U. — vitamin D is one nutrient breast milk doesn’t provide enough of —

and the Institute of Medicine will issue updated recommendations in May 2010.

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1. 1. November 16, 2009 11:49 am [Link](#)

Earlier comments on this Well blog indicated that vitamin D also protects against neurodegenerative diseases, such as ALS, MS, Parkinson's, and Alzheimer's. It truly is the "wonder vitamin."

Question: is there any danger of getting too MUCH vitamin D? Is it a fat-soluble or water-soluble vitamin? There is a risk, for example, of getting too much vitamin A or calcium.

— *Shana*

2. 2. November 16, 2009 11:51 am [Link](#)

Your statement that breast milk does not provide vitamin D is incorrect. Vitamin D is indeed carried to the infant via breast milk. However, nursing mothers who are vitamin-D deficient are not able to transfer adequate amounts to their infant. There are currently several clinical trials in process to determine the optimal supplementation level for nursing mothers, so that both the mother and infant develop normal vitamin D levels.

From Roni Rabin: You're correct. Since so many adults in the United States are deficient in vitamin D, breast milk often cannot provide enough for infants. The American Academy of Pediatrics guidelines specifically state that human milk does not contain enough vitamin D to prevent rickets, and says that in northern regions of the country, there is insufficient sunlight for any baby to produce enough vitamin D. Even in southern regions or in the summertime, infants are supposed to be protected from direct sunlight until at least six months of age.

— *Becky*

3. 3. November 16, 2009 12:04 pm [Link](#)

These studies are tricky. I have been tested and have good levels of Vit. D and had high blood pressure but no weight problems. I have perfect weight as a matter of fact—at only 100lbs. I also take omega 3 daily.

My husband was tested and had seriously low levels of Vit. D, could stand to loose 15 lbs and his blood pressure is only 117/80 and he is almost 60!

— *Kate*

4. 4. November 16, 2009 12:05 pm [Link](#)

Canada has much higher recommendations for Vit D intake. See

<http://www.cps.ca/ENGLISH/statements/II/VitaminD.pdf> for example. Pediatricians in Vancouver, just over the border, suggest 2000IU for children.

I'm an apparently healthy 55 y.o. male in Seattle and need to take 6000 IU/day to get my blood level into the 40's on the blood test (still low-ish).

This is also very interesting regarding vit D level and swine flu:

<http://www.vitamincouncil.org/newsletter/vitamin-d-and-h1n1-swine-flu.shtml>

— *rICHARD GILBAR*

5. 5. November 16, 2009 12:12 pm [Link](#)

To increase your intake of Vitamin D, there are beverages like milk, soy drinks, and margarine as well as fish, liver, and egg yolk that contain Vitamin D.

It's important to check the label for specific amounts as processing takes a lot of the core value away from the food/beverages.

I am curious to know, how much of an effect does the winter season have on the amount of Vitamin D? Is there that much of a difference between levels of Vitamin D during say September compared to December?

<http://runningblueprint.com/blog/marathon-training/7-ways-deal-running-fatigue>

— *Nehal*

6. 6. November 16, 2009 12:16 pm [Link](#)

People with dark skin living in the northern latitudes (like myself) need to pay particular attention to studies like this. From what I've read, living where we do, we would need to spend two hours, totally nude, in full sun in order to get enough vitamin D each day. Between this and the fact that so many of us can't drink milk, we've gotta get on top of those vitamin D supplements.

— *Michelle*

7. 7. November 16, 2009 12:21 pm [Link](#)

Herring anyone?

As posters mentioned in the earlier Well "Phys Ed:" discussion, historical northern peoples all ate high fat diets

from fish, fowl, and/or mammals, and survived sun-free (and anecdotally, type 2 diabetes and heart disease free) through those long dark winters.

If appropriate interventional studies are designed and implemented, I expect it will likely become clear that both sun avoidance and animal fat avoidance are bad ideas for most humans, consistent with our evolutionary history. I'm convinced vitamin D is very important, but it will also be interesting to tease out how much of the associations this study finds are because of the vitamin D vs. the other effects of sun exposure and diet on the human organism.

— *Nick*

8. 8. November 16, 2009 12:22 pm [Link](#)

There has also been research linking low vitamin D levels with an increased risk of breast cancer. Amazing how one vitamin can effect so many different systems isn't it.

Kate @ <http://www.aftercancernowwhat.com>

— *Aftercancer*

9. 9. November 16, 2009 12:28 pm [Link](#)

Ditto Comment #3.

Also, the article is incorrect in stating that breast milk does not contain Vitamin D. The amount it contains is directly correlated to the mother's Vitamin D levels; since many if not most women in North America are deficient, levels in breast milk are often very low. But individual mother infant pairs should be evaluated according to their sun exposure and dietary intake.

Infants may often require supplementation if the mother is deficient herself, and it is vital that the mother also receive proper supplementation for her blood levels to be raised appropriately. (This can often be in the range of 4000-6000iu per day for women who are breastfeeding.)

A simple blood test measuring 25(OH)D levels is the best way to know how much supplementation is required. Recent research is indicating that current recommendations are too low, and optimum levels should be above 50ng/mL.

— *Kelly Hartman*

10. 10. November 16, 2009 12:28 pm [Link](#)

Becky, you're both wrong. Check the AAP recommendations and you will find that they specifically cite the miniscule amounts of "vitamin" D that are transferred in breast milk. Therefore, infants, whether the mother has adequate stores of vitamin D or not, should be supplemented unless they receive at least 20 minutes of full-bodied sun per day (and winter sun is likely to be too weak). Even then, I would test levels to ensure high enough values.

Too little is transferred in the breastmilk to protect the infant. This is because "vitamin" D is really not a vitamin at all—it's a hormone. Evolutionarily, babies were in the sun from birth and their own skin and sunshine made up for the deficit. True vitamins are passed in breastmilk in enough values to sustain the baby. Not vitamin D.

What is not specifically mentioned in this article is that 2/3 of children are also deficient. Even studies of children in sunny Costa Rica found a majority with a deficiency. And the low levels correlated with higher probability of diseases like asthma.

Bottom line: check your levels and supplement accordingly. This deficiency puts people at risk of all sorts of bone and immune-system mediated diseases (in which I include cardiovascular).

— *Tracy*

11. 11. November 16, 2009 12:35 pm [Link](#)

Vitamin D protects against the flu as well:

<http://www.medpie.com/nutrition/featured-videos/antimicrobial-peptides-vitamin-D.html>

— *Robert Latkany, MD*

12. 12. November 16, 2009 12:45 pm [Link](#)

This is particularly interesting in light of the Vyturin Study announced today. In that study a drug that lowered LDL cholesterol more (ezetimibe) had less effect on a surrogate marker for cardiovascular disease (thickening of an artery in the neck) than a drug that reduced LDL less (a form of niacin). This is yet more evidence that the LDL hypothesis is wrong and that LDL is not an independent risk factor for atherosclerosis. Yes, statins work and they do reduce LDL, but it's looking more and more that the mechanism of action of statins that's relevant is not their effect on LDL but their effect on inflammation. Niacin does raise HDL and that might be related to lowering the risk for atherosclerosis.

Interestingly, a number of the pathways through which Vitamin D works are related to inflammation.

The recommendations for Vitamin D intake mentioned in this article are inadequate. Taking 400 IU a day won't raise anyone's vitamin D levels sufficiently to have a metabolic effect. If a person is seriously vitamin D deficient they will likely need at least 2,000 IU a day and probably more.

It should also be pointed out that the 30 ng/ml level recommended in the article are also inadequate. A level of 50ng/ml is needed to get the full benefit of vitamin D including the protective effect it provides against cancer and autoimmune disease. There is also provocative preliminary evidence that Vitamin D can help prevent all forms of flu and that if pregnant women supplement with Vitamin D, their children may have a lower risk for autism; but the jury is most definitely still out on this.

Why are so many people Vitamin D deficient? Because of the paranoia that dermatologists have instilled in the general public about sun exposure. Despite flimsy evidence that sun exposure causes melanoma, dermatologists routinely recommend that everyone avoid the sun and use sunscreen liberally. There is virtually no evidence that this prevents much melanoma but a lot of evidence that it contributes to other forms of cancer that may be related to Vitamin D deficiency. We now know that the recommendations of dermatologists may also be contributing to atherosclerosis.

It's time for the popular press to stop mindlessly repeating the bad advice that dermatologists are giving. The take home message is "Don't slather on the sunscreen." Unprotected sun exposure, if of short duration and responsibly monitored, produces far more Vitamin D than supplements can ever provide.

It is also important for people to ask their doctors to give them the correct test for Vitamin D. The correct test to ask for is 25 (OH) D. The incorrect tests that doctors frequently order out of ignorance is 1, 25, (OH) 2D. The later test is dramatically affected by fluctuating amounts of calcium in the blood and thus gives a poor reading of whether or not the patient is Vitamin D deficient.

The take home messages from all of this:

- 1) Much more research on Vitamin D is needed. The current study while interesting, proves nothing.
- 2) The preliminary evidence is so strong that adequate circulating levels of Vitamin D can help prevent disease that the default position should be to help patients get their Vitamin D levels to 50 ng/ml or higher. (There are rare exceptions, e.g. people with parathyroid disease). Except for the tiny number of people for whom excess Vitamin D intake might cause problems, there are essentially no negative side effects from taking Vitamin D. There are very few, if any reported cases of Vitamin D overdose.

3) The dermatological community needs to ask itself whether it is responsible for causing more disease or curing/preventing more disease.

4) The popular medical press needs to be far more skeptical of claims made by the medical community. Just today in the New York Times we have two examples; the LDL hypothesis is fading fast and the advice to slather on the sunscreen looks like bad advice. The popular press could have and should have been on these two stories months ago.

5) Medical consumers need to educate themselves. Their physicians frequently rely on bad advice and the popular medical press is asleep at the switch.

When will we see a story in the New York Times suggesting that its time to rethink the causes of atherosclerosis? Gary Taubes alluded to this in his New York Times Magazine article a few years back. Why is the rest of the New York Times health and science staff so reluctant to pursue such an important story?

It's time to focus far more heavily on Vitamin D and expose the LDL hypothesis as what it is; "a big fat lie."

— *WigWag*

13. 13. November 16, 2009 12:50 pm [Link](#)

I take vitamin D daily because I can't possibly get enough sun exposure. (Office job.) On vacation, when I'm in the sun more often, I keep taking the same dose. Though I suspect I'm nowhere near an upper limit, I wonder what getting too much vitamin D can do to you.

<http://www.notsuperhuman.com>

— *I'm (not) Superhuman*

14. 14. November 16, 2009 12:54 pm [Link](#)

Tracy (#10),

I humbly beg to differ. The work of Bruce Hollis and Carol Wagner on this subject is excellent. Here is one news article describing the early results of one of their studies, and specifically noting the maternal supplementation dosages which produced adequate circulating 25(OH)D levels in the breastfed infant.

http://www.postandcourier.com/news/2009/feb/26/recommended_d_levels_not_enough73081/

— *Becky*

15. 15. November 16, 2009 12:59 pm [Link](#)

The current article is a great example of how things should be done. Document a correlation between heart disease and low vitamin D levels, but then follow it up by an intervention study asking whether taking vitamin D pills can prevent heart disease.

Correlations are simply not enough. Remember what happened with hormone replacement therapy (HRT) and breast cancer. Correlation studies showed that HRT was associated with less breast cancer, but when subjects took HRT, it actually caused breast cancer when compared to a placebo.

— *jack*

16. 16. November 16, 2009 1:00 pm [Link](#)

#11 don't jump to conclusions. Did you even read the article above? As a physician, have you no clue about the scientific method? Can you quote us a study showing that taking vitamin D pills prevents influenza????

— *jack*

17. 17. November 16, 2009 1:03 pm [Link](#)

The relationship between the kidneys and the heart is not being addressed. Since the kidneys are responsible for producing vitamin D, what was the kidney function of these patients that were deficient in vitamin D? Kidney damage/disease is also responsible for hypertension which ultimately leads to atherosclerosis, stroke and heart attack. Since the kidneys produce vitamin D, a shortage of that might suggest kidney problems. That's the connection, not drinking tons more of milk.

— *Mike McDermott*

18. 18. November 16, 2009 1:08 pm [Link](#)

Many of these studies document associations rather than causations, or reflect results in laboratory preparations. There's little, if any, harm to checking levels, and taking supplements carefully, ideally in the context of a good diet rather than substituting for one. The various reports are fascinating and well worth researching further. But the notion of a 'wonder vitamin' with key roles in every metabolic and pathological process from cancer to influenza to cardiovascular disease to Parkinson's and Alzheimer's, and the implication that a disease-free Utopia awaits its full exploitation, leaves me just a bit skeptical.

Calcium, which vitamin D has been long known to have a crucial role in, does indeed show up in various places. Calcium channels in heart tissue have long been a pharmacological target, for instance, in treating arrhythmias.

Vitamin D is indeed a fat soluble vitamin, so excessive ingestion of supplements can lead to toxicity. Less may well be not enough, but more after a certain point is too much.

— *ProfWombat*

19. 19. November 16, 2009 1:09 pm [Link](#)

There's just so much to say about Vitamin D & its importance to our health.

In August 2009 the National Institute of Medicine convened an Expert Panel to work on new recommendations for Vitamin D—in light of all the research that has come out recently.

Expect new standards sometime around the Spring of 2010.

In the meantime, consider what Dr. Michael Holick, a renowned expert takes (he participated in the panel):

1. 2000 IUs of vitamin D a day.
2. 3 glasses of milk a day = 300 IUs of Vitamin D
3. 400 IUs in his daily multivitamin
4. Between supplements & milk he's getting 2700 IUs a day
5. He plays tennis & cycles outside in his free time. He always wears sunscreen on his face—but leaves his arms & legs exposed—but he lives in Boston. Sensible sun exposure on your arms & legs is the BEST way to build up your Vitamin D stores—10 minutes a day if you are fair-skinned, between the hours of 10-3, with sunscreen on your face, for 2-3 times a week. That ought to do it!
6. What's his 25-hydroxyvitamin D level? He's consistently in the 50-60 ng/mL range. Just where you'd want to be to get all the health benefits of D. 30 ng/mL is the minimum and you can go all the way up to 100 & still be on the very safe side.

To read a summary of the current benefits of Vitamin D:

Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Vitamin D from the Expert, Dr. Michael Holick. How Much Do We Need? Why Is It So Hard to Get Enough? What About Breast-Fed Babies? Why Is It So Important for Good Health?

http://www.happyhealthylonglife.com/happy_healthy_long_life/2009/10/goodbye-sun.html

— *The Healthy Librarian*

20. 20. November 16, 2009 1:13 pm [Link](#)

Re: Shana,

Yes, there are dangers of getting too much vitamin D (usually from excessive doses of supplements): hypertension and hypercalcemia, too much calcium in the blood, which can lead to kidney stones, and overcalcification of bones and other tissues.

— *Julia*

21. 21. November 16, 2009 1:15 pm [Link](#)

My doctor ordered a vitamin D test for me at my last exam. The lab charged \$230 for the test. I could have bought years worth of supplements for that.

— *cheryl*

22. 22. November 16, 2009 1:30 pm [Link](#)

Adequate daily amounts of vitamin D3 also has been shown to reduce the chance of getting 18 different cancers by 50%.

— *Jimmie*

23. 23. November 16, 2009 1:33 pm [Link](#)

Yes, you can get too much vitamin D.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vitamin_D

— *jeanX*

24. 24. November 16, 2009 1:39 pm [Link](#)

The flu season is in the fall and winter when people do not get as much sun exposure. Their vitamin D levels are lower at these times. Vitamin D3 supplements protect against the flu and infections in general.

— *Jimmie*

25. 25. November 16, 2009 1:39 pm [Link](#)

This is very important. I hope everyone pays attention and also helps their parents pay attention to these crucial matters - for heart issues as well as osteoporosis issues.

— *Vince*

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