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Schoolboy wins vitamin D campaign

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Move to raise awareness of link to multiple sclerosis

The NHS in Scotland is to launch an awareness campaign about the links between vitamin D deficiency and multiple sclerosis after being spurred into acting by Glasgow teenager Ryan McLaughlin.



Vitamin D, obtained from foods and through the action of sunlight on skin, is essential for maintaining healthy bones. A deficiency is also linked to incidence of MS, a disease that attacks the central nervous system.

Ryan's mother, Kirsten, has had MS for three years, and Ryan, 14, has shown some symptoms of the disease, but the family only discovered the link earlier this year after a family holiday.

Ryan's father, Alan, said: "We had been in Australia and within 48 hours of being there Kirsten, who was in a wheelchair, was up and about and doing tae kwan-do. We then looked into the research and discovered there was some evidence Vitamin D was the crucial link.

"Kirsten started taking supplements and she hasn't had a relapse since. Ryan has had some symptoms too but supplements have made a real difference for him as well. We started the campaign at Ryan's insistence."

With backing from children's author JK Rowling and the MS Society they petitioned Holyrood and have now obtained a commitment from the Scottish Government to issue guidance to all health professionals who work with pregnant women and young children.

Older children, young adults, older people and women of child-bearing age are particularly susceptible to low levels. Many women begin pregnancy with low stores of the vitamin.

A written response from Holyrood's petitions committee stated there was an "urgent need" to put a plan in place following evidence that a lack of vitamin D, in conjunction with a specific gene variant, may increase the risk of the disease.

The McLaughlins were urging the Government to commit to providing free vitamin D supplements to all pregnant and breastfeeding women and introduce supplements in the form of fortified milk and other drinks in schools.

The Government had already ruled out such commitments, but a written response following Thursday's committee hearing said: "There is a need to educate women about the importance of taking vitamin D supplement when pregnant and the importance of giving their children a vitamin D supplement until the age of four.

"The Scottish Government will agree a co-ordinated programme of action with NHS Health Scotland."

Ryan said: "I was shocked there had not been publicity around this before. We wanted there to be more awareness of the link and more research into how much of a problem it is in Scotland.

"These actions will make a big difference ... it will go a long way to giving Scots children some protection against the disease and give parents proper advice."

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