

Let the Sun Shine on Your Heart Health

By Dr. Tyteeka Reye

The temperature was not the only thing dropping this winter; many people also experienced a decrease in their Vitamin D levels. Now that spring has arrived, it's time to increase our time in the sun and subsequently our Vitamin D levels.

Vitamin D deficiency results in part from reduced exposure to sunlight. Research suggests that Vitamin D deficiency increase risk factors such as hypertension, obesity and diabetes, as well as major cardiovascular events including stroke and congestive heart failure. Though low levels of Vitamin D is usually associated with bone and muscle weakness—it is also plays a role in heart disease, high blood pressure and metabolic syndrome.

According to two new studies at the Intermountain Medical Center Heart Institute in Murray, Utah, preventing and treating heart disease in some patients could be as simple as supplementing their diet with extra Vitamin D. Researchers demonstrated the link between Vitamin D deficiency and increased risk for coronary artery disease. They confirmed that treating Vitamin D deficiency with supplements will help to prevent or reduce a person's risk for cardiovascular disease and a host of other chronic conditions.

The benefit of maintaining proper levels of Vitamin D also helps with the absorption of calcium and may protect you against breast, prostate and colon cancer. Your skin can synthesize all the Vitamin D you need provided you get about 15 minutes of sun three times a week. But aging reduces our ability to absorb Vitamin D by as much as 70%. Supplemental Vitamin D has been found to reduce the risk of fractures from osteoporosis.

It is estimated that up to half of U.S. adults and 30 percent of children and teenagers have Vitamin D deficiency. Low Vitamin D levels activate the renin-angiotensin-aldosterone system and, in doing so, predispose patients to hypertension and a stiffening and thickening of the heart and blood vessels. Vitamin D deficiency also alters hormone levels and immune function, which can increase the risk of diabetes, a major contributor to Cardiovascular Disease.

Treating Vitamin D Deficiency

Basic recommendations for restoring and maintaining optimal Vitamin D levels in patients start with an initial dose of 50,000 IU of Vitamin D3 once weekly for 8 to 12 weeks. Maintenance therapy should be continued using one of the following strategies:

- 50,000 IU Vitamin D2 or D3 every 2 weeks;
- 1,000 to 2,000 IU Vitamin D3 daily;
- Sunlight exposure for 10 minutes for Caucasian patients (longer for people with increased skin pigmentation) between the hours of 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Vitamin D supplements appear to be safe. In rare cases, Vitamin D toxicity (causing high calcium levels and kidney stones) is possible, but only when taking in excess of 20,000 units a day.



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Vitamin D Basics

- Although most of the body's Vitamin D requirements can come from sun exposure, indoor lifestyles and use of sunscreen, which eliminates 99 percent of Vitamin D synthesis by the skin, means many people aren't producing enough. We are outside less than we used to be, and older adults and people who are overweight are less efficient at making Vitamin D in response to sunlight. A little bit of sunshine is a good thing. The use of sunscreen to guard against skin cancer is important if you plan to be outside for more than 15 to 30 of intense sunlight exposure.
- Vitamin D can also be consumed through supplements and food intake. Natural food sources of Vitamin D include salmon, sardines, cod liver oil, and Vitamin D-fortified foods including milk and some cereals.
- Major risk factors for Vitamin D deficiency include: older age, darkly pigmented skin, increased distance from the equator, winter season, smoking, obesity, renal or liver disease and certain medications.

Gluten and Dairy Free Recipes:

Grilled Mediterranean Salmon

Serves 4

4 serving size salmon fillets, rinsed and patted dry (about 1 pound)

1 tablespoon fresh lemon juice

Sea salt and fresh pepper

8 cloves of garlic, roughly chopped

2 red onions chopped

4 cups baby spinach leaves

8 plum or Italian tomatoes, roughly chopped

4 tablespoons balsamic vinegar

2 tablespoons chopped fresh basil

2 tablespoons chopped fresh parsley or cilantro

A sprinkle of red pepper flakes, to taste

Extra virgin olive oil, as needed

Fire up the grill to medium high heat or preheat the oven to 375 degrees F. Tear off a large sheet of aluminum foil and place it on a large tray. Lay the salmon in the center, in a single layer. Pour lemon juice over the fillets. Season with sea salt and fresh pepper. In a large mixing bowl, combine the garlic, onion, baby spinach and tomatoes. Add the balsamic vinegar, fresh chopped herbs, red pepper flakes and toss to mix. Drizzle with enough extra virgin olive oil to moisten it all. Season with a little sea salt and pepper. Toss to coat. Tear off a second sheet of foil the same size as the bottom sheet. Turn up all the edges of the bottom sheet a bit to catch any liquid that runs to the edge. Spoon the spinach-tomato mixture on top of the salmon. Drizzle on any remaining olive oil left in the bowl. Lay the second piece of foil on top of the fish and veggies and crimp the foil closed all around the edges to make a large packet. Place on grill or in oven and cook until the fish is done- about 20 minutes or so. The salmon should be firm appear opaque.