

The Sunshine Nutrient: Why Vitamin D Is Key

One of the best things we can do for our health, and one of the easiest, is the very thing that most Americans are not doing: getting enough vitamin D.

Vitamin D is crucial for fighting disease. A lack of it can lead to serious health problems.

We get vitamin D from the sun, from some foods and from supplements. But despite its abundant availability, an estimated two-thirds of Americans aren't getting enough.

That spells real trouble.

A major new study of nearly 1 million people finds the lower your vitamin D levels, the higher your risk for certain diseases, including the following:

- A 35 percent increased risk of death from heart disease
- A 14 percent increased risk of death from cancer

Vitamin D is nicknamed 'the sunshine nutrient' because it's produced in our bodies when skin is exposed to sunlight.

To get enough vitamin D from the sun, doctors recommend exposing as much unprotected skin as possible—so no sunscreen, spread out over as little as one to two hours a week.

But remember, in order to guard against skin cancer, make sure you don't overdo your sun exposure. If your skin turns pink you've been out too long.

If you can't, or don't want to, get your vitamin D from the sun, some foods are rich in it, such as salmon, mushrooms, fortified dairy and kale.

But even those items might not contain all the vitamin D you need, according to nutrition specialist Dr. Jana Klauer.

“Food sources are really limited, so it’s best for most people to take a supplement,” she said.

Choose vitamin D-3. It makes your heart healthy, improves your immune system, boosts your mood, and since you need it to absorb calcium, it strengthens your bones.

But beware: even if you take vitamin D, certain things lower it from your system, such as smoking, obesity and inflammation, which comes from things like eating too much sugar and trans fats.

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