

HEALTHY KIDS

Is the sun good for us or not?

With summer in full swing, you may have heard the warnings: Don't go in the sun without sun screen. Physicians tell us that exposure to the sun puts us at a higher risk for skin cancers.

Sunburns particularly increase the risk of the most dangerous form of skin cancer, melanoma. But when we wear sunscreen our body can't absorb the ultraviolet rays from the sun that make vitamin D, commonly called the "sunshine vitamin."

There is another side to this story and it revolves around our need for this crucial vitamin. The story of vitamin D would appear to be simple. If you take in enough of the vitamin you will have strong bones. But studies reveal that this vitamin does more than just protect our bones. Vitamin D is proving beneficial in preserving muscle strength and gives us some protection against a number of diseases like multiple sclerosis, diabetes and many cancers including colon, breast and prostate cancers.

Can't we just take a multi-vitamin or eat more foods that contain vitamin D like fish, eggs, fortified milk and cod liver oil?

Two recent studies conducted in Ann Arbor, Michigan and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania report the high prevalence of vitamin D deficiencies among women of child-bearing age—particularly African-American women—and among their healthy babies. In

both studies most of the participants took prenatal vitamins. Early life vitamin D deficiency is associated with skeletal problems, type 1 diabetes and schizophrenia, based on the University of Pittsburgh Graduate School of Public Health study.

The elderly who are home bound or confined to nursing homes may also be at greater risk for vitamin D deficiencies even if they take daily supplements.

"It is true that excessive sun exposure can cause skin cancer, so



prudent care is necessary," says Dr. Janet Sullivan, chief medical officer for Hudson Health Plan and a board certified dermatologist. "If

you have fair skin and burn easily or have a family history of skin cancer use sunscreen, wear a hat and long sleeves when exposed to the sun but also consider taking vitamin D supplements," suggests Dr. Sullivan. Children should be protected from long hours in the sun especially between 11am and 2pm when the sun is the strongest. And don't get sunburned.

Not sure what is right for you? Have a discussion with your doctor. The truth is that many people simply aren't getting enough of this crucial vitamin. Given the myriad benefits of vitamin D, the advantages of a little sunshine may well outweigh the risks.

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