Editor’s Letter Summer 2010

Study Findings Say...

May 25, 2010 By Kate Ferguson

As a health reporter, I’m always online researching health information, hunting for statistics and following the latest study findings. But I get confused and frustrated from the conflicting health and fitness advice doled out by “experts.”

Recently, a colleague e-mailed me a link to a breaking news story about vitamin D. Researchers had published findings showing the importance of this nutrient to overall health. What’s more, the story said blacks and other people of color were at risk of vitamin D deficiency because of the high amount of melanin in our skin. (Melanin is the pigment that makes skin dark.)

Scientists said that because melanin stops sunlight from penetrating dark skin, blacks might be less able to convert the sun’s golden rays into sufficient vitamin D to meet the body’s needs for many of its complex, health-sustaining processes.

Because of this belief, many of the health sites I visited to research vitamin D stressed that African Americans should supplement their diets with additional amounts of the nutrient.

In response to this info, I purchased a bottle of calcium with vitamin D-3, or cholecalciferol, a store-bought version of Mother Nature’s sunlight-produced hormone (yes, vitamin D is actually a hormone because it’s made by the body).

As usual, after religiously including it in my regimen of supplements, I started slacking off. I took it inconsistently. My resolve to maintain a serious regimen of daily vitamin pill-popping inevitably fell victim to my hectic work schedule.

Each morning I’d rush past my stash of supplement bottles, but I barely glanced at my vitamins. I had to hit the road—who had time to take eight to 10 different tablets or capsules each morning?

And when I got home at night, I’d be in a rush to squeeze in a quick workout before collapsing into bed. Then I’d read another story about the importance of some other vitamin. And so the beat would go on.

Now, another vitamin D study broke. This one said research showed vitamin D deficiency in blacks

did not translate into the same health risks that it did for whites. Seems researchers had been measuring vitamin D deficiency only among whites and those numbers had set the standard.

Somewhere along the way, it dawned on the scientists that—with health care being equal between blacks and whites—many diseases caused by vitamin D deficiency, such as osteoporosis (fragile bones) and atherosclerosis (calcium deposit buildup in the arteries), don't usually affect blacks. It turns out that vitamin D levels are naturally lower in blacks. But that doesn't mean we're automatically at higher risk of certain diseases.

As a matter of fact, you may want to be careful about adding unnecessary amounts of vitamin D to your diet with supplements.

This is a perfect example of why it makes sense to first properly chew health news before you swallow what you're being told as gospel. Sure, these breaking stories can draw attention to the state of our physical and mental wellness. But when so much information is available, and health is such an individual experience, you might harm yourself if you react before getting all the information.

What I should have done is remembered that I'd had a bone density test and aced it with a very good score. In addition, if I remained doubtful, I should have asked my doctor about taking a vitamin D deficiency test.

Now when I zoom past my supplement shelves, I smile. Instead of rushing to add to my vitamin supply, I simply resolve to first discuss matters with my doctor.

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