Vitamin D Makes the Grade

This bone-fortifying nutrient scores high in some surprising ways.

August 29, 2007 By Seni George

Newsflash! Vitamin D has been scoring A's as a potential disease fighter. Though it's touted as being important for strong bones—the nutrient promotes calcium absorption—mounting evidence suggests D may also protect against a host of chronic illnesses, like heart disease, diabetes and some 17 different types of cancer. One study, published in June, followed nearly 1,200 postmenopausal women over four years and found that those who downed Vitamin D supplements had a 60 percent greater reduction in cancer risk than those who did not.

What's in it for us? Vitamin D deficiencies are more prevalent in black communities, and some experts suspect that may be one reason why chronic diseases strike us at disproportionately high rates. The lack of D may also help to explain why many black children in recent years have developed rickets, which with improved nutrition had become uncommon.

The problem Though vitamin D is found in some foods, sun exposure is the most important source, because skin converts ultraviolet rays into the vitamin. But darker skin does so less efficiently than lighter skin, and many of us spend lots of time indoors. Black people have to be outdoors six times as long as white people to get the same sun benefits—and that's without counting other factors such as geographic location, cloud cover and wearing sunscreens with SPF 8 or higher, all of which can limit vitamin D synthesis.

The fix Experts generally say that lighter-skinned people should sun themselves for about 10 to 15 minutes at least twice a week, before slathering on sunscreen, to soak up ample vitamin D. But according to Robert P. Heaney, MD, a professor at Creighton University in Omaha and a vitamin D expert, darker-skinned people would be better off taking supplements.

BUYERS GUIDE

Vitamin D supplements come in two forms, vitamin D2 and vitamin D3. Go for D3, the more active form. Current guidelines recommend 200 to 600 international units (IUs) for adults, but experts say those amounts are too low to capitalize on the vitamin's disease-fighting benefits. Instead, experts suggest that black people get about 1,500 to 2,000 IUs a day.

AISLE D

Few foods are good sources of vitamin D, so be sure to add these to your shopping list:

- Fortified milk (1 cup): 98 IUs of Vitamin D
- Cod liver oil (1 tbsp): 1,360 IUs
- Salmon (3½ oz): 360 IUs
- Mackerel (3½ oz): 345 IUs
- Tuna fish, canned in water (3 oz): 200 IUs
- Sardines, canned in water (1µ oz): 250 IUs

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