Low Vitamin D Levels Found in Young People of Color

Latino and Black adolescents with darker skin tones are more likely to be lacking in the "sunshine vitamin."

July 1, 2022 By Laura Schmidt

Vitamin D levels were low in most otherwise healthy Black and Latino adolescents, according to a new study from the University of Houston (UH) College of Nursing. What's worse, those levels continue to drop as these youths age.

"Black and Hispanic populations have a markedly high prevalence of vitamin D deficiency and higher incidence and worse outcomes for cardiovascular disease, certain cancers, type 2 diabetes and renal disease, all of which have been linked to vitamin D levels," Shainy Varghese, associate professor of nursing at the UH College of Nursing, wrote in the study.

Researchers analyzed the records of 119 adolescents of diverse ethnicities ages 12 to 18 from Southeast Texas and found that 61% of Latino and Black adolescents, who showed no signs of another illness, were vitamin D deficient.

"We understand vitamin D levels are low across the board—7 out of 10 U.S. children have low levels, raising their risk for various acute and chronic diseases," said Varghese. "But the relationship of ethnic diversity and vitamin D levels is understudied and limited in adolescents."

Often referred to as the "sunshine" vitamin, vitamin D is naturally produced by cells in the body in response to exposure to sunlight, but people with darker skin have more melanin, which absorbs and blocks UV light from reaching the cells that produce vitamin D.

Vitamin D has numerous benefits, including strengthening the immune system, boosting one's mood, regulating absorption of calcium, and decreasing the risk for heart disease and type 2 diabetes. Some research has shown that patients who tested positive for COVID-19 and had low vitamin D levels experienced more severe respiratory symptoms compared with those with sufficient vitamin D.

Financial stability, education and access to health care are some of the many factors likely to impact vitamin D levels as well.

“This paper calls attention to the need to raise awareness among clinicians regarding social determinants of health and culturally sensitive dietary practices to improve vitamin D levels and prevent long-term complications,” Varghese added.

Few foods contain a significant amount of vitamin D, but Healthline recommends incorporating fatty fish, such as salmon or trout, fish liver oils, eggs and dairy products fortified with vitamin D into one’s diet. Taking vitamin D supplements is another option.

To learn more about vitamin D, read “Vitamin D May Protect Against Breast Cancer in Black and Latina Women” and “Got Vitamin D? It May Mean Less Severe COVID-19.”

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