

What every family needs to know about vitamin D

Vitamin D is essential to good health: It helps build strong bones and teeth, prevents diabetes, and helps fight off infectious diseases.

Where does vitamin D come from?

We produce it ourselves, in our skin, as long as we get enough exposure to sunshine. That's why vitamin D is often called the sunshine vitamin. But to get enough "D" this way, you need more sun than most of us get, especially in winter in the northern regions of the US. And if your naturally dark skin pigment protects you from sunburn, or you're faithful about using sunscreen, you don't get enough sunshine to make D even in the summertime.

Where else?

Milk, infant formula, and fruit juice are fortified with extra vitamin D. Certain foods contain D, too: salmon, canned tuna and sardines, eggs, beef liver, and cheese.

A typical, one-a-day vitamin and mineral supplement contains 400 IU of vitamin D, the current recommended daily requirement for adults. Calcium supplements containing 200 IU of vitamin D are also available.

What about breast milk? Does it have enough vitamin D for an infant's needs?

Unfortunately, because of widespread maternal vitamin D deficiency, it usually doesn't. A mother's milk will have enough D for her baby only if she is

consuming very large amounts of it herself. And most breastfeeding mothers are not. Breastfed infants need vitamin D supplements to stay healthy. The amount should be 400 IU daily.

How much D do children and adults need?

We're not sure what the optimal amount is, but they probably need more than they're getting. At a minimum, children and teenagers should get 200 IU every day, the amount contained in 16 ounces of fortified milk or juice. Additional D can be obtained from a diet that includes eggs, cheese, and liver. If your children won't eat any of these things, they need to get their D from supplements. Luckily for them, swallowing smelly spoonfuls of cod liver oil is no longer the only way to do that; most vitamin pills contain D. New recommendations for D may be coming out soon, so ask your pediatrician to advise you.

Should I be worried about my child's vitamin D status?

If you have a family history of diabetes or osteoporosis, or if your child has cystic fibrosis or signs of poor bone health, ask your pediatrician if a test of vitamin D status should be done. D status can be determined by a blood test and, if a deficiency is found, supplements can remedy the problem.