

# Vitamin D dilemma

New studies imply that higher D levels may combat depression and cancer. Is it a miracle nutrient or an overhyped supplement? SELF seeks D truth.

## 1 Why is D a hot topic?

We know that D helps bones store calcium. Now research shows that higher levels may reduce incidence of colon cancer, says Walter Willett, M.D., nutrition department chairman at the Harvard School of Public Health in Boston. Studies also suggest higher intake may help prevent breast cancer and lift mood. Many experts want to up the adequate intake (AI) based on this data and because sunscreen users may be low. (UVB rays help you make D.) But others say too much D may raise the risk for some diseases (e.g., pancreatic cancer in smokers).

## 2 How much D do I need?

The current AI for women younger than 50 is 200 international units daily (the amount in 2 cups of fortified milk). But many scientists say a healthier intake—enough to help protect against cancer and other diseases—is closer to 800 IUs. The government will release new guidelines in 2010. Amounts greater than 2,000 IUs may lead to kidney stones and vomiting.

## 3 How can I tell if I'm low?

Muscle pain and weakness and bone pain may signal a deficiency, but the only way to know is to get a blood test, says Kathleen Fairfield, M.D., a vitamin researcher in Portland, Maine. Ask if you need a test at your next physical. For now, assess your lifestyle: If you use sunscreen, work inside (windows block UVBs) and don't eat D-rich foods daily, you may be one of the 50 to 78 percent of adults who aren't getting enough D.

## 4 Can I get enough D from my diet?

Two hundred IUs? Yes. But 800 IUs? It's a challenge. You'd have to eat 6 ounces of fatty fish (salmon, tuna, eel) *plus* drink 3 cups of fortified milk or soy milk daily. Fortified cereal (about 40 IUs per serving), yogurt (80 IUs, 6 oz) and eggs (20 IUs each) count, too. Some M.D.s suggest a daily multivitamin providing at least 400 IUs of D<sub>3</sub>, the type of D that the body metabolizes the most quickly. Ask your doctor if you need one.

## 5 Can I skip sunscreen to get D from the sun?

No. Exposing the arms, face, legs or back for 5 to 30 minutes a day, twice weekly, March to October (when UVBs are strongest) *minus* sunscreen allows you to make what you need. (People with dark skin and those living in the North need more time.) But we *know* the sun causes cancer, so why risk it? asks Janet Pregler, M.D., director of Iris Cantor-UCLA Women's Health Center.

## 6 I've read there's a link between low D and weight gain. Is this true?

Oprah's health expert suggested that low D levels may have altered her thyroid function, which in turn could have caused weight gain. But no one knows for sure because research is still looking at the connection between D levels and weight or thyroid function. The best way to lose weight is through dieting and exercise.  
*Additional reporting by Kristen Drybread*

Fortified milk is a great source of D.

### The bottom line

Aim for about 800 IUs daily by eating foods high in D, and ask your doc if you need a multi. Don't take vitamin D—only supplements unless it's "doctor's orders." And keep using sunscreen. Consider yourself D-briefed!