

Seeing the light: Sun Safety and Vitamin D

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Recent media has promoted the health benefits of Vitamin D through increased unprotected sun exposure to prevent and even treat cancer. They suggested that wearing sunscreen might actually contribute to far more cancer deaths than it prevents. They have also questioned the seriousness of skin cancer.

These are dangerous messages that are quite misleading. There is still not enough evidence to prove that practicing sun safety will lead to reduced levels of vitamin D and increase the risk of developing a number of cancers and other diseases, as has been suggested.

“Given the fact that the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has declared UV radiation as a known carcinogen, exposing oneself to it for the sake of vitamin D is not the answer” (Dr Rigel, M.D., clinical professor, New York University Medical Center, American Academy of Dermatology 2005)

“There is certainly ample scientific evidence proving that vitamin D does not need to be produced from UVB exposure to be effective” states Dr DeLeo M.D., associate professor of clinical dermatology, Columbia University, New York, N.Y. “Under no circumstances should anyone be misled into thinking that natural sunlight or tanning beds are better sources of vitamin D than foods or nutritional supplements. The only thing they are proven better at is increasing your risk of developing skin cancer” (American Academy of Dermatology, May 2005)

Most people will get sufficient Vitamin D through their diet and by being exposed to sunlight through their daily activities without intentionally exposing themselves to harmful UV rays. In a recent study, 3449 Canadians were monitored through devices for the amount of sun exposure they received. The study accounted for sunscreen recommendations by subtracting the protection sunscreen provides from this total. The final amount resulted in adequate incidental sun exposure to satisfy the body's requirement of Vitamin D (American Academy of Dermatology, *Sunlight, tanning booths, and vitamin D*, 2005). Sunscreen does not block sunlight but rather filters it so that there are less rays coming through. Even the most effective sunscreens currently on the market let through enough UV to allow for adequate vitamin D formation (American Academy of Dermatology, 2004). Vitamin D is recognized as a nutrient important for health and has strong implications in the reduction of some cancers, Multiple sclerosis, osteoporosis and rickets. It also assists in the absorption of calcium and regulates calcium levels in the blood to make and maintain strong bones. It also should be noted that the sun is not the only source of vitamin D. In addition to exposure from daily activities, it is possible for most people to get enough vitamin D through their diet and/or supplements and it is much safer than over exposing oneself to UV rays.

It has also been stated that skin cancer is rarely deadly. Although some skin cancers grow more slowly and are much more easily treated, there are other skin cancers (Melanoma) that are much more dangerous and can grow and spread rapidly. The rate of Melanoma continues to increase year to year. “This year, there will be 30 per cent more new cases of skin cancer expected in Canada compared to ten years ago” (Canadian Dermatology Association, May 28, 2004). It is estimated that there will be 4, 400 new cases of Melanoma in Canada in 2005(Canadian Cancer Statistics). The most important factor in the development of Melanoma is exposure to UV radiation. Sunscreens are still a safe and effective way to reduce damage caused by UV radiation from the sunlight and from tanning beds. Unlike risk factors from some other cancers (heredity, ethnicity, age, sex) this risk factor we can control.

The Medical Officer of Health for Leeds Grenville and Lanark Dr. Charles Gardner continues to support current expert recommendations. “Skin cancer rates continue to rise. Prevention is the key and sunscreen remains a safe way to protect your skin.”

It is recommended that you continue to follow sun safety practices such as

- Reducing sun exposure between 11 am and 4 pm
- Seek shade
- Cover up arms and legs with tightly woven loose clothing
- Wear a wide brimmed hat and sunglasses
- Wear a sunscreen, SPF 15 or higher
- Check your skin regularly

And get Vitamin D through your diet

- Follow Canada’s Food Guide to healthy eating
- If you are concerned about being Vitamin D deficient, confirm with your doctor and speak to a registered dietitian about how to increase the vitamin D in your diet.

For more sun safety information go to www.healthunit.org or call 1-800-660-5853.