

“LET THE SUNSHINE IN” VITAMIN D

Why is Vitamin D important?

Vitamin D is a special vitamin that is needed to get calcium from the milk, cheese, yoghurt and other calcium containing food your child eats. It helps to build healthy bones and teeth.

Where does Vitamin D come from?

Almost all your child's vitamin D is made when their skin is exposed to sunlight. Very few foods contain vitamin D and therefore it is difficult to get enough vitamin D from the diet alone. Foods that have some vitamin D in them include wild salmon, sardines, tuna, field mushrooms, margarine and dairy products that have had vitamin D added to them.

Why would my child have a low Vitamin D?

A baby in the womb gets all its nutrients from its mother. If a mother has a low Vitamin D, then her baby will be born with a low Vitamin D. Unless the baby is given extra vitamin D supplements then their vitamin D level will stay low.

Breast milk is recommended for feeding babies. There is however very little Vitamin D in breast milk. Breast fed infants at risk of vitamin D deficiency should therefore receive a Vitamin D supplement.

Any child who has limited exposure to sunlight is at risk of having a low Vitamin D. This is especially the case for children with naturally darker skin colour or those who do not expose their skin to sunlight for cultural/ religious reasons.

Another group at increased risk of vitamin D deficiency are children with a chronic illness or disability, especially children with reduced mobility or those with problems of the pancreas, liver or bowel. Some medications also interfere with your child's ability to make Vitamin D. Your child's doctor will discuss this with you if appropriate.

What can happen if my child has a low Vitamin D?

A low Vitamin D can lead to the bones not having enough calcium in them. This can lead to “soft” bones that are painful, do not grow well, bend and break easily.

How do I prevent my child from developing Vitamin D deficiency?

Breast fed infants at risk of vitamin D deficiency should receive a Vitamin D supplement.

Your child needs to play in the sunshine to make enough vitamin D. It is important however to make sure children do not get sun burnt as this can lead to skin cancer later in life. Babies should have very limited exposure to direct sunlight, especially on hot days. In toddlers and older children out-door play is recommended before 10am and after 3pm, as long as the child is wearing a hat and during the hotter months, sunscreen. If your child does not get enough sun light to make vitamin D then they are likely to need a vitamin D supplement of about 400 IU daily to keep their vitamin D levels normal. This can be purchased without a prescription from your local pharmacy or supermarket.

Foods that have vitamin D in them include milk, and margarine that has had vitamin D added to it, wild salmon, tuna and sardines, and field mushrooms. However it is difficult to get enough vitamin D from foods alone.

How will I know my child has Vitamin D deficiency?

There are usually no outward signs that your child is vitamin D deficient and a blood test is needed. Some children however have bone pains, bowing of the legs or muscle weakness. Sometimes an x-ray will give a clue to vitamin D deficiency.

How will my child recover from a low Vitamin D?

If the blood test shows your child has a low vitamin D, the doctor will prescribe a short course of high dose vitamin D medicine followed by a smaller daily dose of vitamin D to stop the deficiency coming back.