

Vitamin D – The Super Hormone Vitamin

Vitamin D could just be the great discovery of the 21st century. True, we have known about Vitamin D and its importance in preventing and treating rickets since the 1920's, but recent studies have revealed that this vitamin - actually a hormone - is vital in so many ways. Some have labeled it our most important hormone, and with over 1000 critical functions, it just might be.

Vitamin D has been shown to be important in preventing heart disease, diabetes, immune diseases and cancer. A Vitamin D deficiency can contribute to multiple sclerosis, depression, chronic pain and osteoarthritis. Adults with a severe vitamin D deficiency may suffer from skeletal problems, including osteoporosis, hyperparathyroidism, osteomalacia (skeletal pain and tenderness) or chronic fatigue syndrome. So we can see that if we want to enjoy the best possible health, we must have an adequate store of Vitamin D.

How much vitamin D is enough? According to the FDA the normal blood range for Vitamin D is from 30 to 100. In my experience levels under 80 are too low. Increasing Vitamin D levels can bring about amazing results. For example, studies have shown a 50% to 60% decrease in multiple sclerosis (MS) with a vitamin D level between 42 and 50. It is interesting to note that MS is uncommon in areas near the equator where sunlight is most intense and it becomes more common farther away from the equator. Research also shows a significant relationship between adequate vitamin D levels and Type I diabetes – a level of 52 results in an 80% reduction. And good news for cancer prevention - a blood level of 53 relates to a 75% reduction in all cancers combined. With vitamin D levels of 65, there is a 67% reduction in breast cancer in women.

Low levels of vitamin D can lead to back, neck and shoulder pain. In December, 2003 a Mayo Clinic article reported a mean vitamin D level of just 12.08 in 93% of 150 patients suffering from persistent nonspecific musculoskeletal pain. These were people who had not been able to relieve their pain through standard therapies such as anti-inflammatory medications or muscle relaxants.

Another study showed an 80% increase risk of cardiovascular disease in people with a blood vitamin D level less than 10. When vitamin D levels were increased, the subjects showed a decrease in blood pressure, fasting blood sugar, body mass index (obesity), triglyceride levels and total cholesterol.

The list of vitamin D benefits goes on and on. Kidney function is improved if vitamin D levels are greater than 37. Vitamin D has also been shown to have very positive effects on the immune system by stimulating the activity of the natural killer cells that destroy bacteria and viruses.

So how much vitamin D should you take? A lot more than the 400IU that was the standard for many years. Most experts think that anywhere between 30,000 and 40,000 international units per day are safe. Personally, I take 10,000 IU a day. Blood levels below 150 ng/ml have not demonstrated any toxicity and some researchers claim blood levels over 300 ng/ml as being safe. I like to see blood levels of 80 to 125 ng/ml in my patients.

Can you get those levels by going out in the sun? Yes. Fifteen to twenty minutes of full body sun exposure in a swimsuit will produce about 8000 IU of vitamin D. Unfortunately a lot of sun exposure tends to damage and age the skin and it is easy to get a sunburn. This is why I recommend a supplemental form of vitamin D.

The form of vitamin D you take makes a big difference in how much your body will absorb. Emulsified vitamin D is most easily absorbed. Oil based capsules or compressed tablets do not seem to work as well.

Lab tests for vitamin D are inexpensive and I recommend them for most people. In my office I have only had one patient come in with an optimal vitamin D level even though many people do take vitamin D supplements. It is best not to assume that your levels are good.

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