

Lana Button

At one time people basked in the sunshine without worries of cancer or premature aging. In fact people were even prescribed sun exposure to treat diseases like rickets and polio. But with today's depleting ozone layer and the risk of skin damage and skin cancer, protecting our skin from the sun has become second nature. Parents especially have become pros at blocking their children from the sun. They dutifully lather them with sunscreen before heading outside, regularly re-apply, and cover their kids with hats and protective clothing. It's become second nature summer behavior.

The problem is we're not just blocking harmful UVA and UVB rays; we're also blocking our body's opportunities to produce valuable vitamin D. Sunscreen with an SPF of 15 blocks our ability to produce vitamin D by more than 98%.

And researchers are discovering just how crucial Vitamin D, sometimes called *the sunshine vitamin*, is to our long-term health. Vitamin D builds strong bones and protects us from rickets and osteoporosis. And in a recent article in the American Journal of Clinical Nutrition it is reported that vitamin D deficiency increases a person's risk of developing a number of debilitating diseases like type 1 diabetes, multiple sclerosis, rheumatoid arthritis, and many common cancers; including breast, colon and prostate cancer. (In fact in Canada, where our long winters limit our sun exposure, there's a much higher percentage of these diseases compared to southern areas like Georgia and South Carolina.)

In Dr. Joel Fuhrman's report, "Importance of Vitamin D" he says vitamin D also keeps our immune system going strong, helping fight off flu and autoimmune diseases like inflammatory bowel disease. Vitamin D is also described as a natural antibiotic, allowing us to absorb medicine more efficiently.

Vitamin D deficiency, uncommon since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, has made a come-back in young children. Dr. Karen McAssey, a Paediatric Endocrinologist, runs a calcium disorders clinic at Mc Master Children's Hospital in Hamilton. She's seeing more and more cases of rickets and osteoporosis in young children. "Some of the children I treat have inherited disorders, but others are vitamin D deficient." Dr. McAssey says it's partly because there's almost no vitamin D in breast milk, but another contributing factor is that children aren't receiving adequate sun exposure.

Because the fact is it's tricky getting enough vitamin D if you are relying on food sources alone. Apart from oily fish and milk, there aren't a lot of foods that naturally contain vitamin D. But our bodies make vitamin D quickly and efficiently with a little casual exposure to sunlight (in ten minutes we produce 20 000 IU of vitamin D).

Ideally a person produces and stores enough vitamin D during the spring, summer and fall, to last throughout the winter. But many experts like Dr. Fuhrman recommend people with limited sun exposure (particularly us northerners) take a supplement to keep adequate stores throughout the year.

Dr. McAssey recommends that parents give their children a vitamin D supplement (400-800 IU a day) especially between October and April. She also says that a glass of vitamin D fortified milk at every meal is the best way for kids to get vitamin D from food sources.

Although Dr. McAssey recommends parents continue to use sun protection for their children on a regular basis she does say, “Parents should allow their children opportunities to be exposed to very short periods; up to 10 minutes, of sun exposure without sunscreen, so they can produce ample vitamin D.”

So grab the sunscreen and hats when heading outside. But considering the health benefits of a good supply of vitamin D, we may want to rethink that ‘zero tolerance’ approach to a few rays of sunshine.