

Employee FAQ: Vitamin D



What is vitamin D?

Vitamin D is a fat-soluble vitamin that has many roles in the body. It can be found naturally in some foods and is added to other foods. And it can be found as a dietary supplement. The body can also make vitamin D when skin is exposed to sunlight.

What are the health benefits of vitamin D?

There are many benefits of vitamin D. It helps the body keep normal levels of calcium and phosphorous in the blood. This is important for strong bones and preventing a disease called rickets. Vitamin D may even help in protecting against some cancers. Older adults, people who are obese, women, and darker-skinned people can have low vitamin D levels. Experts still do not agree on exactly how much is needed to be healthy, though.

How do I know if I'm getting enough vitamin D?

You can ask your doctor for a simple blood test to determine your vitamin D levels. Current research shows that half of Americans are low in vitamin D. Higher rates of vitamin D deficiency occur in African Americans, Hispanics and other individuals living in areas where it is difficult to get enough sun exposure in winter, like Boise or Minneapolis. However, the skin damage that can occur when spending more time in the sun, especially without proper sun protection during months when the UV Index is high, outweigh the benefit of increasing vitamin D. The good news is that there are healthy ways to increase vitamin D.

How can I get enough vitamin D?

The American Academy of Dermatology suggests the best way to get enough vitamin D is through diet and nutritional supplements. You do not need to spend a lot of time in the sun to get enough vitamin D for your body. In fact, research shows that lighter-skinned people only need 10-15 minutes of unprotected exposure to the sun around noon twice a week to meet their need for vitamin D. For darker-skinned people, it takes a little bit longer. Also, in several studies people who used sunscreen had similar vitamin D as people who did not use sunscreen.

Avoid exposing your skin to UV for too long, which puts yourself at a greater risk for skin damage. Instead, take a vitamin D supplement and eat plenty of foods rich in vitamin D. These include fish, fortified milk and margarine, egg yolks, liver, Swiss cheese, and fortified breakfast cereals.

In summary, most people can receive enough sun exposure to meet their vitamin D needs without spending long periods of time in the sun. After a few minutes of exposure, use sun protection (such as long-sleeves, hats, and sunscreen) to prevent sun damage, sunburn, and skin cancer.