

What is vitamin D?

Vitamin D helps our bodies to absorb calcium and phosphorous from our food. These minerals are needed to keep our bones healthy and strong. Vitamin D is also thought to be important for muscle growth and for general good health.

Where does our natural vitamin D come from?

Vitamin D is mostly made in our skin by exposing it to sunlight. Very little vitamin D comes from the foods we normally eat, although some foods are fortified (enriched) with it.

What happens if I don't get enough vitamin D?

A lack of vitamin D (known as vitamin D deficiency) can cause muscle weakness and painful bones. Children with vitamin D deficiency can experience poor growth, tooth delay and find that their bones start to bend out of shape due to a condition known as Rickets.

A lack of vitamin D can cause a general sense of being unwell, feeling tired, perhaps with vague aches and pains.

Vitamin D deficiency is not unusual – research shows that just over 1 in 10 people in Europe have vitamin D levels that are considered to be too low for good bone health. These figures are much higher in winter time.

What causes vitamin D deficiency?

Vitamin D deficiency can happen for a number of reasons:

- Our bodies need an increased level of vitamin D at certain times.
- Our bodies cannot make enough vitamin D.
- We're not getting enough vitamin D from our food.

Who is at risk of vitamin D deficiency?

Some people are more at risk of vitamin D deficiency than others.

Those most at risk are:

- older people,
- people with darker skin,
- people who don't get out into the sunlight – for example, people in hospital or nursing homes,
- people who cover up their skin with clothes for cultural reasons.

Other at-risk groups include people who are obese, children and pregnant or breastfeeding women.

If your doctor thinks you might be at risk of developing vitamin D deficiency, you may be asked to take a prescription medicine or a food supplement to prevent that from happening.