



Healthy

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*Sunshine
in a pill*

The Ultimate D-fense

Thanks to a spate of new studies, the government has upped its recommended intake of this super vitamin. But it may not have gone far enough.

Used to be, a little milk gave you all the vitamin D you needed. Now you'd have to chug a lot of it to get the daily dose suggested by the Institute of Medicine. But many docs say the new guidelines, which rose from 200 international units (IU) to 600 IU, still fall short. "It's a step in the right direction," says Michael F. Holick, Ph.D., M.D., director of the Vitamin D, Skin, and Bone Research Laboratory at the Boston University School of Medicine. "But essentially every tissue in your body needs vitamin D; 600 IU is just too low." The nutrient affects some 2,000 genes and could amp up your immunity to fight off everything from depression to cancer. Plus, many women are D-deficient, says Sarfraz Zaidi, M.D., author of *The Power of Vitamin D*. Based on new research, you should get 1,000 to 2,000 IU a day. *WH* waded through the science to find out how taking enough of the so-called super vitamin may help cut your disease risk.

CANCER

► "Vitamin D regulates cellular growth," says Holick. "So if a cell becomes abnormal or malignant, D tries to normalize it or, if that doesn't work, kill it by blocking off its blood supply." Without enough D, he argues, the body can't cancel out suspicious activity fast enough, leaving the door open for cancer. But although studies show a high D level may cut the risk of colorectal and breast cancers, a 2010 review in the *American Journal of Epidemiology* found it won't do the same for ovarian, endometrial, or esophageal cancers. What is known: People with higher D levels have lower death rates in general, says Holick.

AUTO-IMMUNE DISEASES

► Immune-system illnesses such as lupus and multiple sclerosis (MS) affect far more women than men—but vitamin D could reduce your risk. A recent study found that the nutrient may help strengthen the immune system. Other research shows that ample D levels could cut a woman's overall MS risk by 40 percent. What's an ample level? That's up for debate as well, though most experts recommend a D-blood measure of 30 to 100 ng/mL. (Get a blood test at your doctor's office.)

BONE DISEASE

► Here's one area where the evidence is crystal clear: **Vitamin D is great for your bones—way better than anyone thought**, in fact. Recent research shows that D may be the number one key to building a stronger skeleton. "People have always been so focused on calcium, calcium, calcium," says Carol Haggans, R.D., a consultant for the National Institutes of Health's Office of Dietary Supplements. "But D is essential for bone health; it promotes calcium absorption and defends against osteoporosis."

DEPRESSION

► Though the science remains divided, many experts say upping your D intake helps control mood disorders. To wit, according to a recent study in *The Journal of Clinical Endocrinology & Metabolism*, **women with low D levels are twice as likely to suffer depression**. Though researchers aren't quite sure why, the vitamin seems to have mood-regulating powers, says Holick. Getting enough D could boost your mental well-being.

HEART DISEASE

► According to a study in *Preventive Medicine*, low D levels put you at a higher risk for coronary woes. But research published in the *Annals of Internal Medicine* found that pumping up your D intake may not quash that risk. **"If you're low in D, you're at twice the risk of having heart disease,"** says Zaidi. "But will taking supplements prevent heart disease? We don't know yet." While the larger jury is out, the American Heart Association acknowledges that D plays a role in heart health, likely because it can help regulate blood pressure.

—Sascha de Gersdorff

Sun vs. Supplement

► Your skin makes vitamin D when it's exposed to UVB rays, but lounging in the sun sans sunscreen is obviously a skin-cancer risk. And contrary to some reports, 15 minutes of unprotected sun a day may not be enough to give most people ample D levels, says Michael F. Holick, Ph.D., M.D. He suggests a mixed and measured approach: "Get some D from sensible sun exposure and some from D-rich foods like certain mushrooms and salmon. Also, everyone should take a daily supplement."