

Ensuring Adequate Vitamin D Intake Among Infants and Children



Many people in the United States, including children, do not get enough vitamin D in their diets. In fact, about 52% of children have low levels of vitamin D in their blood. While vitamin D is found in some foods, it can also be taken in supplement form, and be made in the body from sunlight absorbed by the skin. This fact sheet explains what vitamin D does, why a child might need more vitamin D, and then three ways to increase levels of vitamin D in the body: through diet, sunlight, and supplementation.

Why Does My Child Need Vitamin D?



There are many uses for vitamin D in the body. Most notably, vitamin D is an important factor for good bone health and for allowing the skeleton to grow, both of which are crucial for the healthy development of a child. Vitamin D helps the body absorb and use both calcium and phosphorus to build strong bones and healthy muscles. Individuals who are deficient in vitamin D may have unbalanced levels of calcium and can experience muscle weakness. A deficiency in vitamin D is most commonly associated with rickets, a bone softening disease in children. Vitamin D deficiency can also contribute to increased risk of bone fractures, seizures, heart failure, stunted growth, and delayed development. Current research is

investigating links between vitamin D deficiency and higher risk of asthma, diabetes, inflammatory bowel disease, liver disease, mood disorders, and dermatitis. Recommended intakes are 400 International Units (IU) daily for healthy infants under 12 months of age and 600 IU daily for healthy children and teenagers ages 1-18.

Why Might My Child be More at Risk for a Vitamin D Deficiency?

- Limited sun exposure and/or regular use of sunscreen
- Living at a northern latitude
- Children with darker skin often have decreased vitamin D production
- Low vitamin D levels in mothers during pregnancy and breastfeeding
- Infants born prematurely
- Prolonged breastfeeding without supplementation
- Dairy allergy or restriction (vitamin D is frequently added to dairy products)
- Inactive lifestyle or obesity
- Some chronic diseases (especially digestive, liver, kidney, or skin conditions)
- Some medications

What Foods Have High Amounts of Vitamin D?

The foods naturally highest in vitamin D include mushrooms, egg yolks, and oily fish (details in the table below). Because these foods are not part of the typical Western diet, other foods such as milk, cereal, orange juice, yogurt, and margarine are frequently fortified by adding vitamin D to the product. These fortified items can be included in a healthy diet to help meet the recommendations for vitamin D.

Examples of Vitamin D Content in Foods

Food	Serving Size	Vitamin D per serving (IU)
Mushrooms (with UV exposure)	1 cup	1110
Cremini		976
Portabella		732
White		
Whitefish	1 cup	696
Trout	3 oz	502
Herring	3 oz	306
Tuna	1 cup	393
Sardine	1 cup	288
Eel	3 oz	792
Whole egg (vitamin D is in the yolk)	1 egg	44
Fortified milk	1 cup	98
Fortified cereal	1 cup	100
Fortified margarine	1 Tbsp	60
Fortified yogurt	5 oz	88

Food	Serving Size	Vitamin D per serving (IU)
Fortified orange juice	1 cup	100

What About Getting Vitamin D from Sunlight?



Up to 80-90% of the body's vitamin D can come from sunlight. The body can produce its own vitamin D when skin is exposed to the ultraviolet portion of sunlight. The amount of vitamin D that can be produced in the skin is affected by exposure to ultraviolet rays, latitude, season, time of day, clothing/skin exposure, and skin pigmentation. Sun exposure in the middle of the day is the most effective at being processed into vitamin D as compared to early mornings, evenings, and winter days in cold climates.

The issue of sunlight gets more complicated because the ultraviolet portion of sunlight also causes sunburns and increased risk of skin cancer. In addition, sunscreen decreases the amount of ultraviolet light that is absorbed, so sunscreen can prevent the production of vitamin D in the skin. With that said, sunscreen is essential to lowering the risk of skin cancer in children and should not be avoided in effort to increase vitamin D levels. As a result of these many factors, there is no easy general recommendation of how many minutes of sun exposure are needed to produce adequate vitamin D. It is, however, recommended that infants are completely kept out of direct sunlight. For older children, to maintain a balance of increasing vitamin D production and decreasing risk of skin cancer, the recommendation is to apply sunscreen after spending approximately 10 minutes outside. While circumstances vary, 10-15 minutes of midday sun (10 am-3 pm) in a t-shirt (face and arms exposed) in the spring, summer, and fall is enough time in the sun for a lightskinned individual to produce the right amount vitamin D. In places north of San Francisco (all of Utah), the skin can only produce a minimal amount of vitamin D in the winter due to the reduced skin-sun exposure and less intense ultraviolet rays. Vitamin D deficiencies are especially common in the winter months in these areas which is why physicians often suggest getting vitamin D from other sources (generally fish or supplements) between November and March.

Should My Child be Receiving Vitamin D Supplementation?



In some populations it has been found that an oral vitamin D supplement is more effective at improving health status than consuming vitamin D fortified foods or being exposed to sunlight. Supplementation of vitamin D may be necessary if there is not adequate vitamin D in a child's diet or if a child does not spend much time in the sun. You should always talk to your child's health care provider before starting your child on supplementation. A mother's level of vitamin D is also important during pregnancy and breastfeeding in determining vitamin D levels of the infant. The following table has recommendations for supplementation in different stages of life.

Vitamin D Supplementation Recommendations

Life Stage	Recommended Daily Amount	Recommended Method(s) of Supplementation
Pregnancy	600-4,000 IU	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oral supplements
Breastfeeding	2,000 IU	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Either the baby or the mother can be supplemented while an infant is at breastfeeding age. 2,000 IU for the mother provides about 400 IU to the infant
Infants under 12 months, begin supplementation shortly after birth	400 IU	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Liquid/drop supplements • Supplementation is recommended as opposed to sun exposure for infants • Breastmilk from mothers who are taking vitamin D supplements OR • 32 ounces or more of vitamin D fortified formula daily
Children 1-18 years	600 IU	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chewable supplements

Life Stage	Recommended Daily Amount	Recommended Method(s) of Supplementation
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 32 ounces or more of vitamin D fortified milk daily • Adequate combination of sun exposure and food sources
Higher risk groups	May need 800 IU	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • See age recommendations above

Too much of any vitamin can result in a toxicity, where the body cannot get rid of enough of the vitamin and the excess can cause problems in the body. For vitamin D, a toxicity can lead to serious heart and kidney complications. Exceeding the upper limit (the highest recommended amount for most people) can be especially harmful in infants, children, and pregnant or breastfeeding women. The upper limits of vitamin D for these individuals are listed in the table below. It should also be noted that there is no risk of reaching toxicity from the vitamin D produced in the skin from sunlight (the body regulates the amount of vitamin D it produces) and the small amounts of vitamin D in foods make toxicity from food sources unlikely. To avoid toxicity, consult with a healthcare provider and keep supplementation levels below these upper limits.

Upper Limits for Vitamin D Intake/Supplementation

Age	Upper limit (IU)
0-6 months	1000
7-12 months	1500
1-3 years	2500
4-8 years	3000
9-18 years	4000
Adults (including pregnant/breastfeeding women)	4000

How Do I Help My Child Get Enough Vitamin D?

- Read food labels to find and purchase foods fortified with or naturally rich in vitamin D. Food labels are not currently required to list vitamin D, but if they do it will be listed as a daily value percentage. Starting in 2020, the new food labels will be required to list vitamin D and will do so in micrograms. There are 0.025 micrograms in 1 IU.
- Regularly offer your child foods containing vitamin D.
- Encourage your child to play outside, encourage time outside during the early afternoon if possible.
- Talk with your child's pediatrician about vitamin D supplements, especially if your child has any of the risk factors noted above. Use the table above and recommendations from your pediatrician to decide on an appropriate amount and method for your child.
- Discuss any questions you may have about your child's vitamin D intake with your pediatrician.

For More Information and Specifics About Vitamin D:

- Healthychildren.org: <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/healthy-living/nutrition/Pages/Vitamin-DOn-the-Double.aspx>
- Vitamin D Council: <https://www.vitamindcouncil.org/about-vitamin-d/how-do-i-get-the-vitamin-d-mybody-needs/>

- Intermountain Health Care: <https://intermountainhealthcare.org/blogs/topics/heart/2013/01/gettingvitamin-d-during-the-dead-of-winter/>

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