

Vitamin D and you



Important health information
for everyone



How do we get vitamin D?

We get vitamin D from sunlight and from some foods and supplements.

From sunlight


Our bodies can make most of the vitamin D we need through sunlight.

In Scotland, we only get enough of the right kind of sunlight for our bodies to make vitamin D in this way during roughly half the year (April to September), mostly between 11 am and 3 pm.

The amount of sun needed to make enough vitamin D is always less than the amount that causes tanning or sunburn. 10–15 minutes of unprotected Scottish sun exposure is safe for all, but care should always be taken to cover up or apply sunscreen before any exposed skin becomes red or begins to burn.

The amount of time you need in the sun to make enough vitamin D varies from person to person. 10–15 minutes every day of unprotected Scottish sun may not be enough to make vitamin D. This means some groups of people are unlikely to get enough vitamin D from sunlight.

Sunbeds are not a recommended source of vitamin D.



it's difficult
to get enough
vitamin D
from food

Remember – if you use sunscreen correctly this will block UVB light, and therefore vitamin D, from being made. Some make-up also contains sunscreen. However, staying in the sun for long periods of time without the protection of sunscreen increases the risk of skin cancer.

Why is vitamin D important?

Throughout life, vitamin D is essential for keeping bones healthy.

It is important for

- pregnant women
- breastfeeding women
- babies
- young children under 5 years old

to get enough vitamin D when bones are growing.

Babies need enough vitamin D in their bodies before they are born. Without enough vitamin D children can be at risk of developing rickets, which causes weak and badly formed bones.

In adulthood and later life, lack of vitamin D can lead to osteomalacia (softening of the bones) and a greater risk of broken bones.



**Vitamin D
is important
for good
bone health**




From food

It is difficult to get enough vitamin D from food alone; however, it is found naturally in small amounts in:

- oily fish – both fresh and tinned – such as salmon, mackerel, trout, kippers and sardines
- eggs and meat.

Some foods have vitamin D added to them, including:

- some breakfast cereals, soya and dairy products, powdered milks and low-fat spreads and margarines (amounts in these products vary and are often quite small).



some people
should take
supplements



Who is at risk of vitamin D deficiency?

Research shows that many people in Scotland have low vitamin D levels, and several groups are at greater risk of deficiency:

- People who have darker skin, and therefore need to spend longer in the sun to produce vitamin D.
- All people aged 65 years and over.
- All pregnant and breastfeeding women, especially teenagers and young women.
- All infants and young children aged six months to 5 years. However, those infants who are fed infant formula will not need vitamin drops until they are taking solids and drinking less than 500 ml of formula milk a day, as these products are fortified with vitamin D. Breastfed infants may need to receive drops containing vitamin D from one month of age if their mother has not taken vitamin D supplements throughout pregnancy.
- People who are not exposed to much sunlight; for example, those who cover their skin for cultural reasons, are housebound or who stay indoors for long periods.

If you are in one of these at-risk groups, you can make a difference to your health by taking a daily vitamin D supplement.

In the UK it is recommended that adults in these groups take 10 micrograms (μg) of vitamin D every day. Babies and young children should be given between 7 and 8.5 micrograms (μg) of vitamin D every day.



How do I get vitamin D supplements?

If you are a pregnant or breastfeeding mother or have a child under 4 years of age and are entitled to Healthy Start, then vitamin supplements are available free of charge. Ask your health visitor for further information.

Visit www.healthystart.nhs.uk or ask a health professional for more information.



Vitamin supplements are also available to buy. Pregnant women should avoid multivitamins containing vitamin A (retinol), as this can cause birth defects. There are multivitamin supplements available that are specifically formulated for pregnant women that exclude vitamin A. Ask your pharmacist about appropriate vitamin D supplements for you and your child.

For adults, single vitamin D supplements are only available to buy in a limited number of places. The best shops to try are larger branches of high street chemists and some health food stores.

For older adults, vitamin D with added calcium may be recommended by healthcare staff to protect against osteoporosis.

If you are not sure whether you are at risk or not, or don't know which supplements to take, consult your pharmacist, GP or health visitor.

We are happy to consider requests for other languages or formats. Please contact **0131 536 5500** or email nhs.healthscotland-alternativeformats@nhs.net

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