

Enjoy the sun – its good for you

After years of telling people to “cover up” when they go out in the sun, Britain’s leading cancer charity is preparing to dramatically change its advice.

Cancer Research UK plans to say that you should not cover up and slap on protective creams when you first go out into the sun, but rather expose your skin to its rays for some minutes so that your body can make some vitamin D. The sunshine vitamin is now known to help prevent chronic illnesses such as cancer, diabetes and multiple sclerosis as well as classic bone diseases.

One of the charity’s fiercest critics, Oliver Gillie of the Health Research Forum, says that at long last Cancer Research UK appears to have recognised that its warnings to cover up are a mistake. He says that the majority of people in Britain have low levels of vitamin D in their blood because the country does not get enough sun and the benefits of sun exposure in preventing chronic disease substantially exceed any risks of people developing skin cancer.

A new peer reviewed report by Gillie says “it is very difficult for anyone living in the UK to get enough vitamin D from the sun to provide them with the optimum blood level that will last through the winter”. He adds that to do so you may need to expose as much of your body as possible to the sun for at least 40 minutes six days a week, but, given the number of sunless days each summer, this is not possible.

He adds that even outdoor workers such as farmers have difficulty building up sufficient vitamin D – especially as many today drive closed tractors with air conditioning. Men in the building trade who wear shorts in the summer and take off their shirts are one of a very small group of people who may obtain an optimal amount of the vitamin.

“Solving the vitamin D deficiency problems in the UK in the 21st century promises rewards comparable with the great strides in public health made in the nineteenth century by the provision of pure water and in the twentieth century by the provision of better housing, clean air and reduction in smoking.”

Other points in Oliver Gillie’s report

The provision of vitamin supplements for pregnant women and infants “is in a serious muddle”. Britain is the only country among 31 in Europe that does not recommend any daily vitamin D supplement for women of child-bearing age, and therefore is doing nothing to reduce the risk that women do not have enough vitamin D in their bodies when they become pregnant. The Healthy Start Vitamins policy, launched by the Labour government five years ago, offers vitamin supplements to “mothers in need”. But these are not mothers who need vitamin D, but mothers who qualify for welfare benefit.

Milk has been fortified with vitamin D in the US and Canada since the 1930s and is available as an option in some European countries. Finland introduced mandatory fortification of milk in 2003, and recently the Republic of Ireland has fortified semi-skimmed milk. However scientists and doctors advising British governments have been unable to agree a strategy for fortification.

Massive savings

“The cost of improving vitamin D levels in the UK population is very small compared to the likely gains to human happiness, the public health and the public purse.”

Disease caused by vitamin D insufficiency costs some £27 000 million a year in the UK, which compares with about £5000 million for tobacco-related disease.

Dr Gillie's Health Research Forum offers advice about exposure to the sun, saying that the middle of the day is a good time to sunbathe. “Remove as many clothes as you can. Start by sunbathing for 2-3 minutes each side. Gradually increase from day to day to a maximum of half an hour per side. Taking care to avoid burning”, and “do not use sun screen while aiming to boost vitamin D”. The risk of skin cancer is most closely associated with burning rather than ordinary sun exposure or careful tanning.