

Vitamin D and sun exposure

Skin cancer is the most common cancer diagnosed in Australia. More than 430,000 Australians are treated a year for skin cancers. Of these, over 10,500 new cases of melanoma are diagnosed. Each year there are around 1600 deaths from melanoma and non-melanoma skin cancer. Australia has the highest rate of skin cancer in the world.



Key points

- The sun's ultraviolet (UV) radiation is both a major cause of skin cancer and the best source of vitamin D.
- Most people get enough vitamin D by going about their usual daily outdoor activities.
- Just 10 minutes in the sun on most days of the week outside peak times (10am to 3pm)
- Always protect yourself from the sun all year round in the Northern Territory.

The major cause of skin cancer is too much exposure to ultraviolet (UV) radiation from the sun. Skin can burn in as little as 15 minutes in the summer sun so it is important to protect your skin from UV radiation.

However the sun's UV rays are also the best source of vitamin D, which we all need for strong healthy bones. Vitamin D also has other health benefits, with research showing it may protect against some important diseases.

We know that despite our sunny climate, some Australians who spend little time in the sun may have low levels of vitamin D.

What is vitamin D?

Vitamin D is a hormone that controls calcium levels in the blood. It is needed for the development and maintenance of healthy bones, muscles and teeth and it is also important in general health. Vitamin D is stored in fat and muscle and released slowly. The body can store enough vitamin D to last between 30 and 60 days.

Where do you get vitamin D?

Almost all vitamin D comes from the sun's UV radiation. We can get a small amount of vitamin D from some foods such as

milk, margarine, oily fish and eggs but usually this is not enough to keep us healthy.

Do you need more sun to get enough vitamin D?

Most people usually get enough vitamin D just by going about their daily outdoor activities. But to be sure you're getting enough vitamin D while still being SunSmart, follow these guidelines:

- Always protect yourself from the sun all year round in the Northern Territory. The UV Index is high to extreme nearly everyday of the year in the Northern Territory.
- Exposing your face and arms to the sun for 10 minutes outside peak UV times of 10am—3pm should give you enough vitamin D

Keep in mind:

- To get enough Vitamin D, you need only to expose about 15% of your body, such as your face, arms and hands. It's not an excuse to sunbake
- The body can only absorb a certain amount of vitamin D at a time. Prolonged sun exposure does not cause vitamin D levels to increase. Short periods of sun exposure may be more efficient at producing vitamin D.
- Solariums are not recommended for boosting vitamin D levels because of the health risks associated with using solariums.

Will sunscreen stop you from making enough vitamin D?

Regular use of sunscreen when the UV radiation level reaches 3 or more does not greatly decrease vitamin D levels over time.

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Information sheet



Who is at risk of vitamin D deficiency?

Most Australians get enough sun exposure to sunlight to ensure they have enough vitamin D to form and maintain healthy bones. However some groups of the community are more likely to be at risk of vitamin D deficiency. These include:

- Naturally very dark-skinned people, who need more UV radiation exposure to produce adequate levels of vitamin D as the pigment in their skin reduces UV penetration.
- People who cover their skin for religious or cultural reasons
- The elderly and people who are housebound or in institutional care
- Babies and infants of vitamin D deficient mothers, especially babies who are exclusively or partially breastfed
- People with osteoporosis

People in these groups or others who think they may be vitamin D deficient should ask their doctor about their vitamin D levels. Vitamin D levels can be checked with a simple blood test. Increased sun exposure may not be enough and some people may need to take a vitamin D supplement.

Further research is needed into the amount of sunlight required to maintain adequate vitamin D levels for people at risk of vitamin D deficiency.

What is considered naturally very dark skin?

All skin types can be damaged by too much UV radiation; however, naturally very dark-skinned people are relatively protected from skin cancer by the large amount of skin pigment (melanin) in their skin.

Do people with naturally very dark skin need to worry about sun exposure?

Yes—care still needs to be taken in the sun. Even though skin cancer is less common in dark-skinned people, skin cancers that do occur are often detected at a later, more dangerous, stage. People with naturally very dark skin do not normally need to apply sunscreen and can safely tolerate relatively high levels of UV radiation without getting burnt.

Regardless of skin colour, the risk of eye damage remains. Cataracts have blinded around 16 million people worldwide. According the World Health Organisation, sun exposure may be a factor in up to 20% of cataracts, especially in countries close to the equator.

It is recommended that all people, regardless of skin type, wear a hat to protect their eyes.

Slip



Slop



Slap



Seek



Slide

