



Vitamin D Tests: *When you need them—and when you don't*

Reprinted from Choosing Wisely Canada

Many people don't have enough vitamin D in their bodies. Low vitamin D increases the risk of broken bones. It may also contribute to other health problems. That's why health care providers often order a blood test to measure vitamin D. But many people do not need the test. Here's why:

A test usually does not improve treatment.

Many people have low levels of vitamin D, but few have seriously low levels. Most of us don't need a vitamin D test. We just need to make simple changes so we get enough vitamin D. We need to get a little more sun and follow the other advice provided below.

Even if you are at risk for other diseases, like diabetes and heart disease, a vitamin D test isn't usually helpful. The test results are unlikely to change the advice from your health care provider. It is much more important for you to make lifestyle changes first—to stop smoking, aim for a healthy weight and be physically active. And, like most other Canadians, you should try to get enough vitamin D from sun and foods. And talk to your health care provider about supplements.

Extra tests lead to extra treatments.

Getting tests that you don't need often leads to treatments you don't need, or treatments that can even be harmful. For example, if you take too much vitamin D, it can damage your kidneys and other organs.

When should you have a vitamin D test?

Talk to your health care provider about your risks. Here are some conditions where you might need a vitamin D test:

- If you have osteoporosis. This disease makes your bones weak, so that they are more likely to break.
- If you have a disease that damages your body's ability to use vitamin D. These are usually serious and ongoing diseases of the digestive system, such as inflammatory bowel disease, celiac disease, kidney disease, liver disease and pancreatitis.

If your health care provider suggests getting a vitamin D test, ask about your risks. If your risk is high, you should get the test. If your risk is low, ask if you can avoid the test. Ask if you can boost your vitamin D with sunlight and food, and

possibly supplements. If your health care provider needs to keep track of your vitamin D, make sure the same test is used each time. Ask your health care provider which tests are best.

About Choosing Wisely Canada

Choosing Wisely Canada is the national voice for reducing unnecessary tests and treatments in health care. The Saskatoon Community Clinic recommends that you consult their website for important information about medical testing www.choosewiselycanada.com.

Health Canada Vitamin D Recommendations

How can you get enough vitamin D?

Get some sun. The sun's ultraviolet rays create vitamin D in your skin cells. All you need is about 10 minutes outside each day during spring and summer.

Eat food sources of vitamin D. Fatty fish, eggs and liver are naturally rich in vitamin D. Vitamin D is added to foods like fluid milk, fortified milk alternatives, some yogurts and margarine.

Talk to your health care provider about supplements. Health Canada recommends anyone over age 50 take a daily supplement of 400IU. Taking more than 4000IU of vitamin D a day may be harmful.

The Community Clinic dietitians recommend the following resources:

- Health Canada Vitamin D and Calcium: Updated Dietary Reference Intakes
- National Institutes of Health Office of Dietary Supplements Vitamin D Factsheet
- Institute of Medicine of the National Academies Dietary Reference Intakes: The Essential Guide to Nutrient Requirements

Consult the above resources for recommended dietary allowances.

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