

Vitamin D deficiency: An underestimated health problem

Humans make thousands of units of vitamin D within minutes of whole body exposure to sunlight. From what we know of nature, it is unlikely such a system evolved by chance as suggested by Dr. John Cannell, Executive Director, Vitamin D Council. Vitamin D so called sunshine vitamin although previously thought to be of trivial importance is gaining attention as its deficiency leads to multiple health issues. This is significant today even more than historically, because vitamin D and a healthy diet represent a real fountain of youth. It has been clearly established that the only way for your body to synthesize vitamin D is in your skin once it's exposed to ultraviolet rays from the sun.

Arthritis, osteoporosis, cancer, dementia, autoimmune, skin and lung diseases; psoriasis; cardiovascular diseases, diabetes and rickets have only one thing in common that is vitamin D deficiency. The importance thus cannot be stressed further. Food fortification with vitamin D was thought to have conquered, vitamin D deficiency worldwide, but now it is estimated that more than one billion people worldwide have vitamin D deficiency or insufficiency. According to several studies, in developed countries 40% to 100% elderly population are deficient in vitamin D. In developing countries, such as Saudi Arabia, India and UAE, where ample amount of sunlight is available, almost half population has serum vitamin D level below 20ng/ml. In this issue Dr. Shazia Majid has reported that 88% of the pregnant women from central Pakistan region were having either deficiency or insufficiency of serum vitamin D. This alarmingly high prevalence of this condition, may have potential health hazards to the population at large.

Specific to pregnancy, there is an association between vitamin D deficiency and many adverse maternal and neonatal outcomes. Several studies have shown an association between vitamin D deficiency and an increased risk of eclampsia, gestational diabetes, preterm birth and low birth weight babies. Adequate Vitamin D and an acid base balanced diet in the developing fetus and in growing children will; ensure healthy brain development, reduce the risk of infection, improve response to vaccines, builds stronger bones and teeth, reduce the risk of arthritis, scoliosis, high blood pressure, diabetes, heart diseases and autoimmune diseases in later life and reduce the risk of breast cancer, prostate cancer and other malignancies as well. One can accumulate all of this protection before puberty ends.

In today's urbanized society vitamin D deficiency, dietary imbalances, and couch potato-ness are enormous bottlenecks in the quest for health. But the impact of correcting vitamin D and dietary deficiencies on our health will be more profound and less costly than any other interventions. Adequate amount of dietary vitamin D intake, sensible sun exposure is suggested for its prevention. Brief exposure to sunlight over much of the body is most efficient way to obtain vitamin D. Six days of exposure can last for months. Food sources evidently are better absorbed than supplements, but supplements are better than nothing. A health promotion campaign is warranted to motivate the community for life style modification to fulfill the need to prevent this disease.

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