

The Vitamin D Challenge for Modestly Dressed Women

By Ita Yankovich

Now that winter has finally retired, we can put away those heavy boots and coats, bring out the sandals and light clothes, and get some sunlight on our pasty, white skin. For a long time the sun was a public enemy blamed for causing serious problems such as skin cancer, but now we know that some sunshine is actually beneficial to our overall health, especially with regard to our daily vitamin D intake. This can present a challenge to many Orthodox Jews who devote most of their daylight time to indoor activities and study, and especially to women who practice modest dressing. In fact, a 2001 study cited in *Pediatrics* confirmed that Brooklyn's ultra-Orthodox Jewish children are vitamin D deficient, as are 30% – 50% of those living a religious lifestyle involving modest dress. So how can we get adequate vitamin D when our attire may restrict it?

Vitamin D is our body's only source of calcitrol, which we need in order to absorb and utilize calcium, which keeps bones and teeth strong and is essential for normal blood clotting and muscle and nerve function. Studies confirm that sun exposure has numerous other health benefits, such as: treating skin diseases like psoriasis, vitiligo, atopic dermatitis, and scleroderma. UV radiation also enhances skin barrier functions, neonatal jaundice, treats season mood disorder, enhancing mood and energy through the release of endorphins.

How exactly does sunshine get converted to a vitamin? Dr. Dana Cohen, a NY-based general practitioner, explains that when the skin is exposed to UV radiation, a chemical reaction occurs in the epidermis of the skin that converts pre-vitamin D (technically called 7-dehydrocholesterol) into provitamin D or cholecalciferol. From there it gets metabolized in the liver into 25 hydroxy vitamin D. This is typically what is measured and indicative of your vitamin D levels. From there it goes through

one more process, called hydroxylation, and gets converted to the active form of vitamin D to be utilized by the tissues in your body, including the colon, brain, breast and heart.

The only way to know if your levels are optimum is through a simple blood test and a consult with your doctor.

However, there is no need to stress if you dress modestly and cannot sunbathe. Experts say you

not penetrate glass to generate vitamin D in your skin.

Some doctors downplay the effects of modesty on vitamin D levels. One South Florida cardiologist, Dr. Adam Splaver, says that even Floridians, who are bathed in sunlight all year, are struggling to maintain optimum levels of vitamin D, "and as an Orthodox Jew, I can also tell you that modesty, or lack of it, does not have a major impact."

tuna, sardines, herring and mackerel. Purchase milk, orange juice, cheese, yogurt, and cereals fortified with vitamin D. Keep in mind that only about 10% of vitamin D intake comes from food, so it is nearly impossible to get adequate amounts solely from diet.

The next step is talking to your doctor about which and how much supplements you should be taking. Ilyse Schapiro, a registered dietician, nutritionist and author



only need about 30 minutes of sunshine twice a week on exposed skin (no sunscreen) that includes face, arms, neck and legs. All skin exposure is equivalent (arms and face vs. back and legs), however the only factor that might cause a restriction is pigmentation. The more pigmentation in areas, the less UVB absorbed, says Cohen.

Your body can make 20,000 units of vitamin D after only 20 minutes of summer sun. You can get the required amounts in the privacy of your own home by laying out in the sun in a secluded porch, rooftop or even under a skylight, but make sure the window is opened since sun rays can-

He says that in his practice, he has not seen a discernible difference in the Vitamin D levels of patients who are modestly dressed vs. those who are not. This is because the exposure to the sun does not promote sufficient levels of Vitamin D, (even to Floridians) who have maximum sun exposure, and everyone needs to supplement from other sources, such as food or vitamins.

Regardless, how can we be certain of getting sufficient vitamin D intake through sunshine when we have lifestyle restrictions?

Make an effort to eat foods that are good sources of vitamin D such as egg yolks, dried shiitake mushrooms and fatty fish like salmon,

working in NY, recommends taking a supplement with vitamin D, especially when you take into consideration geography, climate, sun sensitivity, eating habits, and our busy lives.

"I look for a supplement that has 400 IU for kids and 1000 IU for adults. I like alternaVites because not only does it have a lot of Vitamin D which is certified kosher and vegetarian sourced in both its children and adult formulas, but it has a lot of other nutrients as well," she says. ♥

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