Vitamin D and Sun Protection

Vitamin D is also called the “sunshine vitamin” and is known for its role in building and maintaining strong bones. Current studies are exploring vitamin D’s role in health and disease prevention while research shows that more than three out of four Americans have inadequate vitamin D levels.

Because it is referred to as the “sunshine vitamin”, you might think that vitamin D comes from the sun. However, vitamin D is very unique as it is made in the human body when skin is exposed to the ultraviolet (UV) light in the sun’s rays. Unfortunately, vitamin D can be found in only a handful of foods such as oily fish.

Five to 30 minutes of direct summer sun exposure twice a week is equal to a light-skinned person taking 20,000 IU of vitamin D orally. Typically, we obtain 90 percent of our vitamin D from sunlight. Winter sunlight in Kansas during December through February is too indirect for vitamin D formation. Stored levels of vitamin D drop during these months, and experts believe immunity drops as a result.

While it is important to enjoy the sunshine and get your fill of Vitamin D this time of year, it is also important to protect yourself from over exposure to sunlight. According the American Academy of Dermatology, skin cancer is the most common cancer in the United States with one in five Americans developing skin cancer in their lifetime. Sun avoidance is the best defense against skin cancer; seek shade, wear protective clothing, and generously apply sunscreen.

The American Academy of Dermatology recommends choosing a sunscreen that states the following on the label:

- **Broad Spectrum**
  - Protects skin from ultraviolet A (UVA) and ultraviolet B (UVB) rays.
- **SFP 30 or Higher**
  - Indicates how well a sunscreen protects from sunburn.
- **Water Resistant**
  - Sunscreens can be “water resistant” for 40 minutes or “very water resistant” for 80 minutes. Sunscreens are not waterproof or sweatproof and need to be reapplied every two hours.

Most adults need approximately one ounce of sunscreen to fully cover their body.

Experts in vitamin D research believe five to 30 minutes, twice a week, of direct sun on exposed skin without sunscreen allows light-skinned persons to manufacture ample vitamin D. Those with dark skin may require up to three times as much sun exposure. Ask your healthcare provider how much sunlight exposure if right for you and be sure to protect your skin during times of prolonged sun exposure.

Information obtained from K-State Research and Extension and the American Academy of Dermatology.

~Jessica Kootz, Family and Consumer Sciences Agent