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VITAMIN D AWARENESS, TESTING ON THE RISE

The benefits of Vitamin D in enhancing health and in preventing an assortment of serious diseases have received a good deal of attention in the past year. Now, two major campaigns have been launched to increase public awareness of the “Sunshine Vitamin” and to test levels in people worldwide.

For the second year in a row, the month of February was dubbed “Vitamin D Deficiency Month” by the UV Foundation. “New scientific studies continue to confirm the enormous health benefits of Vitamin D, while supporting significant health consequences of being deficient,” said Tim Miller, communications director for the group.

The benefits of Vitamin D being promoted through the campaign include growing evidence that it helps to reduce many types of cancer, type 1 diabetes, hypertension, flu and colds. People who are deficient have increased risks of heart disease, Parkinson’s disease and rickets. With a person’s Vitamin D levels frequently deficient during the winter months, problems related to the drop may include fatigue, depression and bodily aches and pains.

One recent Harvard Medical School study published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* reported that some 60% of all Americans are deficient in Vitamin D. This is especially true during the winter months when outdoor exposure to the sun, the major source of Vitamin D, is limited. Additionally, people who live south of the 37th parallel (like Sacramento, CA and Richmond, VA) do not acquire Vitamin D from the sun during the winter months.

Along these lines and to help solve the problem north of the border in Canada, a new study has been launched to increase awareness and testing of Vitamin D serum levels in the body. As part of a worldwide effort to solve what is being called the epidemic of Vitamin D deficiency, 2,000 Canadians are being sought to participate in a 5-year study.

The Canadian participants will join others from the United States, Japan, Australia, New Zealand and Great Britain as part of a testing program called “D (*) Action.” The program of blood serum level testing is being conducted by the organization GrassrootsHealth, a consortium of scientists, institutions and individuals who are working to solve the deficiency epidemic.

This is especially important in Canada where University of Calgary research showed that an estimated 97 percent of all Canadians are Vitamin D deficient by the end of February. “We need Canadians to get tested and get their serum levels up to the 40-60 ng/ml range,” said Carole Baggerly, the director of GrassrootsHealth. Ms. Baggerly is a cancer survivor committed to spreading the word that Vitamin D can reduce breast cancer risk by as much as 80 percent.

There are various means of increasing Vitamin D levels besides sun exposure, including eating foods fortified with vitamin D (such as milk products), fish that are rich in oils or taking a Vitamin D supplement. Current daily levels set by the United States government are 200 IU for people up to 50 years of age, 400 IU for those 51-70 and 600 IU for those over 70. A consortium of scientists from GrassrootsHealth suggests taking these levels much higher, all the way to 2000 IU per day.

The benefits of Vitamin D have been kept under wraps too long by those who teach a fear of the sun for the benefit of selling sunscreen products or drugs. The healthy effects of Vitamin D are enormous and it is good to see this vital information coming more into public view.