

Health Effects Of Tanning and Vitamin D: Medical Research Shows Benefits

In several studies last year, scientists found the health effects of tanning far more beneficial than they once thought. This time the evidence is strong and continues to grow. The results of these studies, showing positive health effects from tanning, challenge one of medicine's most fundamental beliefs that people need to cover themselves with sunscreen whenever they're in the sun. Now researchers think that doing so may actually contribute to far more cancer deaths than it prevents.

The beneficial health effects of tanning involve vitamin D production. **Vitamin D is an important building block to a healthy body and strong, healthy bones.** It is naturally produced by the body when skin is exposed to ultraviolet rays, either outdoors or in tanning beds. Sunscreen blocks its production, but dermatologists and various health agencies have long preached that such lotions are needed to prevent skin cancer. Now some scientists are questioning that advice.

Last year, four separate studies found that **Vitamin D helped protect against lymphoma and cancers of the prostate, lung and, ironically, the skin.** The strongest evidence is for preventing colon cancer. The problem is that many people around the country aren't getting enough vitamin D, and vitamin D production is one of the bi-products of tanning indoors and outdoors.

Contrary to what many believe, supplements and milk don't necessarily do the trick. The amount needed per day is difficult to get from food and fortified milk alone, and supplements are problematic. So the bottom line results from these studies tells us that even if too much sun leads to skin cancer, which is rarely deadly, **the positive health effects of tanning far outweigh the negatives.**

This doesn't mean that you should immediately go out and fry yourself on a beach or at a tanning salon. But many scientists believe that "safe sun" (15 minutes or so outdoors a few times a week without sunscreen) is beneficial to your overall health.

The Health Effects Of Tanning: Know The Facts

One researcher is Dr. Edward Giovannucci, a Harvard University professor of medicine and nutrition. He states his case in a keynote lecture at an American Association for Cancer Research meeting in Anaheim, California. The results from his research suggest that those who received enough vitamin D by means of exposure to UV (plus other sources) **might help prevent 30 deaths for each one caused by skin cancer.** He states, "I would challenge anyone to find an area or nutrient or any factor that has such consistent anti-cancer benefits as vitamin D. The data are really quite remarkable."

Apparently these statements so impressed the American Cancer Society's chief epidemiologist, Dr. Michael Thun, that the **American Cancer Society is currently reviewing its sun protection guidelines.** "There is now intriguing evidence that vitamin D may have a role in the prevention as well as treatment of certain cancers," Thun said.

How Much Vitamin D Do I Need And How Do I Get It?

Now there is a large amount of debate regarding how much the RDA for vitamin D should be, and even government advisors cannot agree. They say an adequate intake is 200 international units (IUs) a day up to age 50, 400 IUs for ages 50 to 70, and 600 IUs for people over 70. Many scientists think adults need 1,000 IUs a day, and now **Giovannucci's research suggests 1,500 IUs might be needed in order to significantly curb cancer.**

Dr. Giovannucci also states that **diet accounts for very little of the vitamin D** circulating in blood. Some supplements contain the nutrient, but most use an old form -- D-2 -- that is far less potent than the more desirable D-3. Multivitamins typically contain only small amounts of D-2 and include vitamin A, which offsets many of D's benefits. As a result, pills might not raise vitamin D levels much at all and can be dangerous if more than 2,000 IUs per day of Vitamin D are taken in pill form. On the other hand, **there is no limit on vitamin D produced by sunshine.** So this reiterates the beneficial health effects of tanning in moderation.

Another interesting fact is that people in the northeastern United States and northerly regions of the globe like Scandinavia have higher cancer rates than those who get more sunshine year-round. So while all this **evidence underscores the positive health effects of tanning, beware of over-exposure and burning,** which are very detrimental to your skin and can lead to skin cancer later in life.