

A shot of the sun to get you going

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If the sight of a severely sartorially-challenged Anna Hazare-supporter maniacally waving the tricolour on every channel for days on end has left you feeling low, hit the off button on the remote and step out in the sun. Having enough vitamin D lowers symptoms of depression, reported the American Society for Nutrition, after tracking vitamin levels and mood in 81,189 women in the US over a decade.

Four in five Indians are deficit in Vitamin D, an essential vitamin synthesised by the skin when exposed to sunlight. An hour of sunlight is enough for the body to meet its vitamin D requirements - just 10-20% of this vitamin comes from food - yet in sunny India, 96% newborns, 91% healthy schoolgirls, 78% hospital staff and 84% pregnant women have low levels of this free vitamin.

Vitamin D is needed to maintain normal blood levels of calcium and phosphorus. It also makes bones strong by helping in calcium assimilation, which prevents osteoporosis or brittle bone disease. The sunshine vitamin also has a role to play in lowering blood pressure that is a risk factor for heart attacks and stroke and protecting against diabetes, some cancers and autoimmune disorders such as multiple sclerosis.

In a sunny country like India where people have more milk than anywhere else in the world, one in two women and one in three men over 50 have low bone mass, which can lead to debilitating fractures in later life, reports World Health Organisation. Globally, data shows one in four women and one in five men over 50 years are affected.

Vitamin D during pregnancy can effect the bone health of the newborn. A US study reports that the mother's high vitamin D levels strengthen bones more than the milk children drink in the first nine years of a child's life. Food sources of Vitamin D are egg yolk, butter, cheese, cod liver oil and other fish liver oils.

Most of an adult's bone tissue is built in the teens and twenties, with physically active teens gaining almost 40% more bone mass than the less active ones. Maximum bone development taking place between 11 and 19 years, but it is increasingly getting compromised with young people spending long

hours hunched over computers and yo-yoing between starving or overdosing on junk food, caffeine, alcohol and nicotine.

So common is the deficiency of the sunshine vitamin among Indians that a standard dose of vitamin D -- available in calcium tablets (250 international units or IU per 500 mg calcium carbonate) -- is not enough to achieve recommended levels, found Dr Ambrish Mithal's study of post-menopausal women in India two years ago. His study recommends women over 50 years have a higher daily dose of vitamin D supplementation -- 1000 IU/day (500 IU per 500 mg calcium carbonate) - for healthy bones.

Vitamin D supplementation apart, eating foods with plenty of calcium - found in broccoli, mustard greens, turnip greens, cabbage, salmon, canned sardines, shellfish, almonds, dried beans --- brings down fracture risk. People over 50 who are agile - measured by their ability to get up from a chair effortlessly, like Anna Hazare when he is not fasting - are less likely to have fractures than those who are less agile.

This means that a walk in the sun could save you from an artificial hip or knees later in life. If you are sitting down while reading this, I suggest you at least move your chair to a sunny spot.