

SUNNY

After years of hiding in the shade, **HANNAH STEPHENSON** basks in the health benefits of the sun

delight

The dangers of too much sun and its links with skin cancer have been drummed into us. However, research shows that some sunshine is good for you, boosting vitamin D levels and helping banish the blues.

Exposure to sunshine can alleviate tiredness, increase libido and make us feel much more alert. It can help to ease depression, particularly Seasonal Affective Disorder, caused by a lack of sunlight in the winter months.

Sunshine also boosts levels of serotonin, the body's natural happy hormone, which can work wonders for our mood, particularly if combined with exercise.

Some of the benefits are undoubtedly psychological, but there are proven physical effects too.

"Sunshine is the largest source of vitamin D, which is essential for bone health and can reduce the risk of some cancers and circulatory disease, such as heart attack and stroke," says Graham Bentham, professor of environmental sciences at East Anglia University. "It can also guard against autoimmune diseases such as multiple sclerosis and Type 1 diabetes (where the body stops making insulin and blood glucose levels rise).

"Some 80 to 90 per cent of our vitamin D intake comes from sunlight exposure. The rest is from diet and supplements."

Known as the 'sunshine vitamin', vitamin D is made by our bodies through the action of the sun's UVB rays on our skin.

It's essential for absorbing calcium, keeping bones healthy and protecting against serious diseases. Oily fish such as salmon, trout and sardines are high in vitamin D as well as eggs, margarine, fortified breakfast cereals, fortified milk and orange juice. However, many of us don't eat anything like the required daily amounts.

Graham stresses people should only need a small amount of exposure to the sun – just a few minutes each day, without wearing sun cream (which blocks the creation of vitamin D), to keep their levels topped up.

"It depends on your skin type, but a few minutes a day should be enough," he says. "People shouldn't be exposed to levels of sun which are going to cause sunburn, because vitamin D in the skin is formed quickly and too much sun can degrade the intake."

If normal levels are built up in the summer, our bodies are likely to store enough of the vitamin to last us through winter. But in the good old UK, an estimated 60 per cent of people have insufficient amounts of vitamin D.

Although Britain has no official dietary recommendation for consumption of the sunshine vitamin, the US recommends five micrograms. Most adults in the UK get less than three.

Vitamin D deficiency has been linked to several types of cancer, including breast, prostate, colon and melanoma.

Graham continues: "If you don't get sunlight exposure during the non-winter part of the year, you will be deficient in vitamin D, which will eventually lead to health problems."

Vitamin D supplements are available, generally made from fish oils, predominantly cod liver, or in multivitamin tablets. However, there's no evidence to prove popping a pill is any less effective than exposure to sunshine, says Graham.

Modern lifestyles may be contributing to reduced exposure to sun. He adds: "Studies in the US show that vitamin D synthesis has declined, which is related to children playing computer games and watching TV, and may also be connected with people being concerned about the damaging effects of exposure to sun."

The message is be sensible. Don't avoid the sun but don't go on a sunbathing binge, either.

Caroline Cerny, Cancer Research UK's SunSmart campaign manager, says: "Vitamin D is essential to help our bodies build healthy bones and evidence is increasingly showing it may reduce the risk of certain cancers, especially bowel cancer."

"It's easy for most people to make enough vitamin D from short periods of exposure to the summer sun," adds Caroline. However, she warns: "There's never a need to burn your skin."

"Sunburn doubles the risk of the melanoma, the deadliest type of skin cancer, so it's important to find a balance between getting the beneficial effects of the sun while not putting your long-term health at risk."

Cancer Research UK recommends spending time in the shade between 11am and 3pm, when the sun's rays are most powerful.

Those more at risk of being vitamin D deficient include people with very dark skin, those who wear clothing that conceals most of their bodies, people who are house-bound or unable to go outside frequently, and pregnant and breast-feeding women.

■ Visit www.sunsmart.org.uk for more details.



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– Cancer Research UK's Caroline Cerny



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