

## EASY Does It: Vitamin D

### An EASY guide to deciding whether to try something for COVID

When you are choosing whether or not to do something for your health, take it EASY! All four factors - 1) Effects, 2) Access, 3) Safety, and 4) You – can help you make a decision.

Tom is 68 years old and has heard a lot about different vitamins that could keep him from getting a viral infection like COVID or help to keep it from getting bad. He read that vitamin D (VD) can help but to stop taking it if you have an infection.<sup>1</sup> To decide what to do, he used the EASY guide:

**Effects:** VD is sometimes called “the sunshine vitamin,” because it is made in the skin from sunlight. It is important for healthy bones and helps the immune system, your body’s ways of fighting off infections. Study results are mixed, but overall, taking VD (in addition to what is in your food) might lower the chances of getting an infection, especially in people with low VD levels.<sup>2-5</sup> Some experts warn that you should stop taking VD supplements when you have an infection because studies *in cells* show that VD might make inflammation if you have an infection.<sup>1,6-7</sup> Studies *in humans* are needed to see if this is true.

**Access:** VD is found naturally in only a few foods, such as fatty fish, fish liver oil, and egg yolks from hens that have been fed VD. Dairy foods such as milk have added VD, but other dairy, like cheese and yogurt, might not have added D. VD is also naturally made in the skin when it takes in ultraviolet rays from sunlight. You can probably get all the VD you need by spending a short time outside with your face and arms exposed two to three times a week, but this can depend on your age, skin color, use of sunscreen, and where you live.<sup>8</sup> If you live north of 40 degrees north latitude (Boston is 42 degrees north), you cannot get VD from the sun between mid-October and early March because of the angle of the sun.<sup>8</sup> The body can store VD for use in winter, but winter might be a good time to take VD. The recommended dietary allowance (RDA) for VD is 600 IU/day for women and 800 IU/day for men.<sup>9</sup> VD supplements are not costly.

**Safety:** VD toxicity does not happen from too much sun exposure, but you can get too much from supplements. The upper limit that is unlikely to cause harm is 4,000 IU a day for all adults.<sup>9</sup> Some experts suggest that you might need to take 1,000 to 2,000 IU per day to bring you up to an adequate level.<sup>10</sup> While VD supplements might protect you from getting sick, we just don’t know if it will cause harm if you keep taking it while you are sick. VD is just one of many things that affects your immune system. Things such as whether you have an existing health condition, your genetics, and lifestyle factors such as diet, smoking, and physical activity can all affect how you respond to an infection.

**You:** Tom is doing what he can to stay healthy and fight off infections, including washing his hands often and physical distancing. He has been taking 1,000 IU of VD daily for many years and hopes his VD levels are in a good range to protect him from infection. He now understands that more research is needed to know whether he should stop taking VD if he gets sick.

*Tom decides that if he gets sick, he will take a break from his VD just to be safe. Because he’s been taking it for a long time, he probably has some good stores that will get him through the illness, and he can start taking it again when he is feeling better.*



The information in this handout is general. **Please work with your health care team to use the information in the best way possible to promote your health and happiness.**

## For more information:

ORGANIZATION	RESOURCES	WEBSITE
University of Wisconsin Integrative Health	Other COVID resources	<a href="https://www.fammed.wisc.edu/integrative/resources/modules/">https://www.fammed.wisc.edu/integrative/resources/modules/</a>
Whole Health Institute	Whole health resources	Coming Soon!

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