

Vitamin D in Tasmania - getting the right UV balance

How to safely get vitamin D from the sun in Tasmania

Vitamin D is needed for good health and is mostly produced in the body when your skin is exposed to sunlight. The amount of vitamin D your body produces from the sun depends on your skin type, the amount of skin you expose, the strength of the sun (UV Index) and the duration of your exposure. As a guide, Cancer Council Tasmania suggests the following:

When the UV Index is high (6 or above) – often occurs mid-October to mid-March

- Have regular exposure to the sun (1-2 times daily).
- Keep exposures short (10-15 minutes), so you reduce the risk of sunburn.
- Expose lots of skin, so you produce vitamin D in a shorter time.
- Use sun protection for longer exposures when the UV is 3 and above.
- **Avoid sunburn - it increases your risk of skin cancer.** Fair skinned people can burn within 15 minutes when the UV Index is 9 or above, so check the index regularly and exercise caution.

When the UV Index is moderate (3-5) – often occurs mid-March to mid-April and mid-September to mid-October

- This is a great time to top up on vitamin D and reduce the drop in levels over Winter. Enter Winter months with higher vitamin D levels by getting extra sun mid-March to mid-April, and boost your levels again after Winter by getting extra sun mid-September to mid-October.
- Have regular (1-2 times daily) and short (10-15 minutes) exposures to the sun.
- Use sun protection for longer exposures when the UV is 3 and above and always avoid sunburn.

When the UV index is low (below 3) – from mid-April to mid-September

- It is difficult to produce adequate vitamin D during this period.
- Longer exposures to the sun are needed, so get outside as much as possible.
- Being outside at midday is best!
- Expose as much skin as possible.
- No hats or sunscreen unless outdoors for long periods or near reflective surfaces such as water or snow.

People with naturally very dark skin may require 3 - 6 times as much sun exposure as fair skinned individuals.

What is vitamin D and why is it important?

Vitamin D is produced in the body when the skin is exposed to sunlight. Adequate vitamin D is crucial for bone and muscle development, and for the prevention of osteoporosis. Recent evidence shows that vitamin D deficiency might also be linked to diseases such as multiple sclerosis, colorectal cancer, type 1 diabetes, cardiovascular disease and tuberculosis. The Australian diet provides insufficient vitamin D for health needs.

Vitamin D deficiency is common in Tasmania

In summer and autumn around 33% of Tasmanian teenagers and adults are vitamin D deficient (blood vitamin D level <50 nmol/L), and in winter and spring around 66%. In winter even those who spend a lot of time outside can be deficient. Studies show primary school aged children are much less likely to be deficient as they play outside all year round.

Sectors of the community more at risk of vitamin D deficiency

- People who spend little time outdoors during the day.
- People who are only outdoors when UV levels are low (early morning or late afternoon).
- People who use sun protection all year round, including sunscreen, moisturisers or cosmetics with UV protection.
- People with naturally dark skin, including people from Asia (Northern, South East and Central Asia), Africa, and Pacific Islands, because they may need 3 – 6 times more UV exposure than those with fair skin.
- People who cover their skin for religious or cultural reasons.
- People who are overweight or obese.
- Tasmanians in winter, because the UV is low and most people's skin is covered when outside.
- Babies of vitamin D deficient mothers.

Your GP can provide individualised advice. For some people Vitamin D supplementation is an alternative method to increase vitamin D levels.

How do I know how high the UV index is?

The UV index gives you information on the strength of the sun.

Check the UV Index daily at: www.cancertas.org.au, www.bom.gov.au/uv, in the weather section of the newspaper and as a free app for smart phones from www.sunsmart.com.au/resources/sunsmart-app.