

## What is **Healthy Start**?

This is a national Department of Health programme aimed at ensuring pregnant women and growing children have access to vitamin D supplements. If you are pregnant, contact your GP / midwife or health visitor and if you are eligible they will provide you with a voucher to obtain the vitamin D supplement. Each tablet contains vitamin D and C and folic acid.

You need to take one tablet a day during your pregnancy and until your child is one year old. You can stop taking other folic acid supplements once you start the Health Start supplements. When your baby is six months old your health visitor will provide you with information as to how to get infant vitamin drops for your baby. You need to continue these until your child reaches the age of five.

In addition to these supplements it is important that you follow the advice on sun exposure and diet. Further information can be obtained from [www.healthystart.nhs.uk](http://www.healthystart.nhs.uk)

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## why is **vitamin D** important?

- For strong bones and healthy muscles
- For good general health
- To help prevent cancer, diabetes and heart disease

## Where does **vitamin D** come from?

### Sunlight

The main source of vitamin D comes from sunlight, which acts on our skin to produce about 90% of our vitamin D requirement.

Two to three exposures of sunlight per week for 20-30 minutes to bare arms and face in the summer months (April to September) are sufficient to achieve healthy vitamin D levels in fair skinned people that last throughout the year. This is not the same as sunbathing; the skin simply needs to be exposed to sunlight. Darker skins need more sun to get the same amount of vitamin D as a fairer skinned person.

### Foods

Most foods contain very little natural vitamin D. Those that provide the best are cod liver oil and oily fish such as salmon, trout, mackerel, herring, sardines, pilchards, tuna and anchovies. Eat two or more 125g (4oz) portions a week.

Smaller amounts are found in:

- Liver
- Egg yolk
- Mushrooms
- Fortified foods (where vitamin D has been added) such as margarine, some cereals and infant formula

### Supplements

Vitamin D supplements can be purchased from pharmacies and many supermarkets. These are a good solution for many people in the north of England of who can't get enough vitamin D from sunlight or food, particularly in winter months. For most adults, a dose of 20 to 50 micrograms (800 to 2,000 units) of vitamin D is sufficient to maintain good health. For children over 6 months, 10 micrograms (400 units) daily is a suitable dose.

## What is **vitamin D** deficiency?

It is currently estimated that one in six people have a deficiency. If you have been told you have a deficiency it means there is not enough vitamin D in your body. This can occur in three situations:

- Increased need for vitamin D – growing children, pregnant women and breast feeding mothers all need extra vitamin D
- Situations where the body is unable to make enough vitamin D – people with pigmented skin, those who get very little sunlight on their skin eg housebound and institutionalised individuals, those who cover up outside, medical conditions where we have poor absorption, elderly people who have thinner skin.
- Not enough dietary vitamin D – eg strict vegetarian or vegan diet

## What are the **symptoms** of vitamin D deficiency?

For many people they may not have symptoms other than vague aches and tiredness. Common symptoms may include:

- Muscle pains and weakness – slow to walk in children, difficulty with walking in adults.
- Bone pain in the ribs, hips, pelvis, legs and feet
- Bone deformities: soft skull bones, bow legs
- Fractious children or poor weight gain in babies and children

## What is the **treatment** for vitamin D deficiency?

If you have symptoms and / or are in one of the at risk groups, it is important to make an appointment to see your doctor. If you are found to have a deficiency then they will recommend a course of treatment and provide lifestyle and dietary advice.