

THE FAMILY PRACTICE

WESTERN COLLEGE, COTHAM ROAD, BRISTOL BS6 6DF

Your Vitamin D Level is Low:

Understanding your vitamin D level:

Vitamin D is created in our skin by exposure to sunlight. It is important for healthy bones but some scientists and doctors think that satisfactory levels of vitamin D may protect us from cancer and heart disease. Around half of adults in the UK do not have adequate levels of vitamin D. In people with particular risks, such as osteoporosis or osteopenia (conditions on reduced bone density), those who cannot absorb some foodstuffs adequately and those who cannot get sufficient exposure to sunlight, we may recommend supplements with vitamin D or advise testing for vitamin D levels.

Your vitamin D level is less than 30:

If your level is less than 30 then we would recommend treatment and your doctor will prescribe a 'loading' dose to get your levels up. You may then consider buying some vitamin D over the counter to prevent your levels from dropping in future (see below).

Sun Exposure and Dietary Recommendations:

Sunlight:

Vitamin D is made in our skin by exposure to UVB rays from the sun. The body regulates the amount of vitamin D made in this way so it is not possible to make too much, but it is important to avoid burning. For most people 10 minutes outdoors in the sun between 11am and 3pm is currently recommended. You must be outside because UVB does not pass through glass. Between October and March the angle of the sun is too low to allow sufficient UVB to reach us so we have to rely on the reserves stored in our body during summer. If you have fair skin that burns rather than tans then you should use a different way of supplementing your vitamin D levels

Diet:

Vitamin D is found in moderate quantity in oily fish, including raw herring, canned sardines, salmon and mackerel. It is also added to some cereals, drinks and spreads. You should aim to get about 400 IU a day (10 micrograms)

Supplements:

If you are unable get enough vitamin D from the sun and do not take enough oily fish, then you can buy vitamin D supplements over the counter from the chemist or from a store such as Holland and Barrett. In general we recommend that you take between 800 and 1000IU (20-25 micrograms) a day.

Retesting:

We do not routinely recheck vitamin D levels. If you are at high risk of a bone fracture related to osteoporosis or osteopenia your GP may recommend retesting your vitamin D level after 6 months. Because it takes a long time for your blood levels to reach a stable state it is usually not helpful testing before this.