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the use of vitamin D supplements has been hotly debated in medical circles in recent years, with some experts arguing their usefulness remains uncertain. Today, a study published by the British Medical Journal found taking them reduced common coughs and colds. Now, the authors want it to be added to our food.

But Public Health England says the evidence is inconclusive. Professor Adrian Martineau was the lead author of the study and joins us now. Good morning. Thank you for your time. Tell us what you discovered in your study. So, our study was a meta-analysis, putting together information from 25 clinical trials. A total of 10,933 patients from four continents across the world in 19 countries and the trials investigated whether vitamin D supplementation can reduce acute respiratory infections, cold, flu, cough, bronchitis and pneumonia. What we found in the population overall was it was a highly statistically significant but modest effect of 10% in the population as a whole and when we drill down and look at the people who have vitamin D deficiency we saw a big effect with a 50% reduction and the halving of risk in respiratory infection in that group. And you have gone on to

extrapolate that could mean three and a quarter million people would get one fewer acute respiratory infection per year. That is right. Although it is modest, the fact it is, means a small reduction can have major health benefits. Around seven out of ten of us have at least one infection are year. That reduction could stop around 3.25 million people having at least one infection each year. So you will help with some of the reaction to the studies. Public Health England said the evidence you have presented is inconclusive on coughs and colds but at the same time it should be taken. On the coughs and colds, which is the new element, it it is inconclusive. Yes, I have read that but it is not clear on what basis

they have made that judgement. Certainly where we are not arguing, it is over the overall recommendation. We agree with them that the average vitamin D requirement should be ten micrograms per day. What we say is that there is an added motivation for the population to meet that requirement. Can I ask you about what people are supposed to make of this, if you are suggesting so many people require more vitamin D, how should they get that if they are indeed lacking? Well vitamin D is the sunshine fight on but in the UK with the latitude, sunshine is only of sufficient intensity to make vitamin D in the skin for six month of the year so therefore we have to fall back on alternative approaches. One is supplementation, which is what Public Health England encourage, which the general population means should consider a supplement over winter and spring, the alternative,

in the US, Sweden and Finland, is fortification, where vitamin D is added to foodstuffs such as milk and bread, which has shown to be highly effective in eliminating profound vitamin D deficiency in the population at a low cost of around 11 eurocents per person per year. Some people hear the evidence you present today might think why not if there is a possibility of it reducing the chances of a severe respiratory illness, why not take vitamin D? Are there any risks attached to taking too much vitamin D? It is possible to take too much but you have to tried quite hard, what we recommend is 400 units, so it is a fraction of the amount. Taking the amount recommended, ten micrograms per day, is enough to eliminate the risk of profound deficiency and would be very safe to

take. Professor, thank you very much for your time this morning. That is very interesting to hear all of that.