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02/16/2017 01:13:02 PM

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Researchers say taking vitamin D supplements could prevent more than three million people in the UK from getting colds or flu each year. Sunshine is needed to produce the vitamin naturally in the skin - and levels plummet during the winter. The team - from Queen Mary, University of London - says the vitamin should be added to foods like bread. Here's our health correspondent, Dominic Hughes. This is what vitamin D deficiency can look like. Softened bones bowing under the weight of the body. In children it can cause rickets. But now researchers say vitamin D may have other benefits apart from strengthening bones. Effectively, vitamin D boosts the production of natural antibiotic substances called antimicrobial peptides, which are toxic to bacteria and viruses. We have shown the effects of vitamin D to prevent respiratory infections are on a par with those of the flu vaccine and that is a significant effect.

They argue that if everyone got enough vitamin D there would be a 10% reduction in the risk of respiratory illnesses like coughs, colds and flu. Among those with the very lowest levels of vitamin D, the benefit is even greater - a 50% reduction. And across the whole UK population, that would equate to more than 3 million people avoiding a cold or flu each year. Sunlight on the skin is the best source of vitamin D but the increased use of sunscreen, and our weather, means exposure in the UK is limited. It is possible to get vitamin D through some foods. For example, cereals, particularly those marketed at children, have vitamin D added as a supplement. You can also get it from oily fish or from eggs, although you would have to eat ten every day to ensure you got the right amount. What researchers are arguing is that vitamin D should be added as a supplement to products like milk so that we all get our fair share. But some scientists believe that fortifying food with vitamin

D will not be enough. The recommendation is more around that we should all take a supplement in the winter months, in autumn, and in those groups that are at risk, so people with darker skin or who aren't outside as much, they should take them all year round. While the specific benefits of vitamin D are still being debated, sunshine and supplements seem to be the best sources.