Are you fighting vitamin D deficiency?

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Vitamin D is having its moment in the sun, again. A recent study published in the British Medical Journal has said doses of vitamin D can cut the risk of colds and coughs - a view earlier held of vitamin C. But the latest study (close on the heels of an Australian one that rubbished the taking of vitamin pills altogether) stated: 'Vitamin D supplementation was safe and it protected against acute respiratory tract infection overall'.

Studies have linked vitamin D deficiency to an increased risk of breast diseases, colon disease, rickets, heart disease, etc. Colds and coughs notwithstanding, in the UAE, most people aren't getting enough sun. "Indeed, due to sedentary lifestyle, most people are deficient in vitamin D in the UAE," says Dr Suhail M. Kazim, consultant general surgeon and medical director, Med-are Hospital. Khaleej Times spoke to doctors, who pointed out that it's not just sun exposure and vitamin-popping that will normalise D levels. Exercise is crucial, to get the liver working. Medha Nagpal Peddakotla, a nutritionist based in Dubai, advocates exercise for vitamin D absorption. She says every third person who comes to her with their blood work for a diet plan is vitamin D deficient. People need to get out and walk for 30 minutes a day in the morning to soak inadequate vitamin D.

She advises her clients to exercise in the morning on an empty stomach, rather than in the evening before dinner. Peddakotla herself pops a vitamin D supplement once in 15 days. And advises people to "pump up on green vegetables" - kale, spinach, seaweed and fenugreek are especially good for the D-deficient. She's a vegan - doesn't consume milk-eggs-oily fish, and has been having vitamin D supplements for over a decade. Calcium, she points out, needs vitamin D to get absorbed." No matter how much milk you drink, if your body isn't getting vitamin D, calcium won't be absorbed."

This past week, given the overcast skies, chances are, UAE residents haven't gotten enough vitamin D. Dr Luzia Sampaio, rheumatology specialist at the Dubai Bone and Joint Centre told Khaleej Times, "Less UVB reaches the skin on a cloudy day and the skin makes less vitamin D." There's also the matter of air pollution. "Polluted air soaks up UVB or reflects it back into space so the skin makes less vitamin D". Vitamin D levels of less than 30 ng/ml are associated with elevated bone resorption (process of transfer of calcium from bone tissue to the blood) and impaired muscular performance."

Dr Shabeer Nellikode, founder and managing director, Universal Hospitals, Abu Dhabi, says, "In the UAE and the Gulf region in general, there are several intricate public health issues in the context of vitamin D deficiency that needs to be addressed. Changes in lifestyle such as diet, lack of exercise, cultural habits, avoiding sun exposure due to excessive heat, and other risk factors predispose those who live in gulf countries, are likely to become vitamin D deficient." He advises different dosages for different age groups (SEE BOX).

Dr Kazim points out the role of skin colour, "Fair skinned people in too much of sunlight without using sunscreens have an extra increased risk of getting skin cancer. For vitamin D, you just need a few minutes every day during midday when the UV rays are maximum and dark-skinned people would need 15 minutes. No need to overdo anything".