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Australian-first study of office workers reveals low levels of vitamin D

- 42% of office workers deficient in Vitamin D at the end of winter.
- 1 in 3 office workers experience low levels of Vitamin D in summer.
- People who use sunscreen have higher levels of Vitamin D than those who don't.
- People with dark skin are deficient in vitamin D in both summer and winter.

A study - the first of its kind in Australia to examine vitamin D levels in office workers - has found one in three are deficient in the essential nutrient during the summer, putting them at greater risk of osteoporosis, poor muscle function and other health problems.

The results of a study which examined the vitamin D levels of 104 male and female employees at Nestlé Australia's head office in Sydney, will be presented at the Dietitians Association of Australia annual conference in Adelaide tomorrow.

According to the study forty-two per cent, almost half, recorded low levels of Vitamin D at the end of winter. Vitamin D is produced naturally by the body through exposure to the sun's ultraviolet rays.

Nestlé's head of Corporate Nutrition, Dr Penny Small, said the company approached Sydney University on behalf of Nestlé's 30 dietitians who were concerned about the emerging research into Vitamin D deficiency.

"Our dietitians really wanted to get an understanding of how this mounting evidence into Vitamin D deficiency was playing out in the workforce and Sydney University agreed to help us find out," she said.

"What we did find out was alarming, and it prompted a lot of discussion on how we can use these results to benefit not just us here at Nestlé but the wider community."





A world expert in Vitamin D, Professor Rebecca Mason, who led the joint study, said she was concerned at the results.

“In a relatively young and healthy population you don’t expect these results,” said Professor Mason, from the Bosch Institute and Sydney Medical School.

“What’s really alarming is that some of the women in the study were of childbearing age and vitamin D is important for the healthy development of a foetus as well as beneficial to the health of the mum.”

Professor Mason said one of the causes of the deficiency could be linked to people working longer hours in more sedentary jobs as well as spending more leisure time indoors.

The study also revealed that people who ate fish had higher levels of vitamin D compared with those who didn’t while 90 per cent of those with dark skin were deficient by the end of winter.

“We also found that those who wear sunscreen had higher levels of Vitamin D than those who didn’t use sunscreen so it’s vital we still follow the safe sun messages but get out in the sunshine for short periods of time during the day – all year round,” she said.

Professor Mason recommended that people get 10 minutes of sunshine mid morning or afternoon in summer every day and up to 30 minutes around midday during winter, depending on how far south people live.

In 2008, Nestlé signed a multi-company commitment to the World Health Organisation to fight chronic disease in the workplace.

“More than 95 per cent of sites in the Nestlé world offer preventative medicine programs for employees which cover blood tests and vaccinations as well as nutrition training,” Dr Small said.

She said Nestlé was keen to work with experts such as Professor Mason and Government authorities on the Vitamin D fortification of foods.

“Vitamin D is in our Sustagen and Nestlé Malted Milk Powder but we will definitely be looking at this issue in more detail,” she said.





MEDIA RELEASE

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