For optimum health we need to eat right and exercise. If we do these things to perfection but do not have an adequate amount of vitamin D from exposure to the sun or supplements we may become ill with significant illnesses that could have been avoided. Physicians and lay people need to be made aware of the rapidly growing amount of information available on the importance of Vitamin D to our health so as to be better able to avoid diseases that result from inadequate amounts in our bodies.

First, Vitamin D is really not really a “vitamin” at all. It is a hormone made in the skin when a variant of cholesterol is hit with energy from the sun and changed into what is called “pre-vitamin D.” The energy that breaks the cholesterol variant is the same energy that would have damaged a protein or even the DNA material of the skin cells. In this way cholesterol is “sacrificed” to protect the skin from damage that could result in skin cancer. In the sacrifice it becomes something vitally important to the health of the body.

This important little hormone has several very important areas of action. One is to help maintain the balance of calcium in the blood. It does this primarily by increasing absorption of calcium from the intestines. Having adequate amounts is necessary for strong bones and helps us avoid osteoporosis and osteomalacia.

Another important function of Vitamin D is “Terminal Differentiation.” Vitamin D goes into the nucleus of the cells of the body and helps them know when to stop growing when the tissue or organ...
reaches its appropriate size. We can understand the importance of this as we are growing from infants to adults but there is another important way in which this function is vital to us. Vitamin D is an anti-cancer hormone. You seem a cancer is simply a cell (or group of cells) that have lost it’s terminal differentiation and has begun to grow without the normal limits on growth.

It is a surprise to some to find that there is significant evidence that higher levels of Vitamin D in the blood actually protect against prostate\(^1\), colon, breast\(^2\), lymphoma and other cancers. A recent look at African American health professionals found and increase incidence of colon cancer if those with little dietary or environmental (sun) exposure to vitamin D\(^3\). Garland, et al\(^4\) demonstrated an 80% reduction in colon cancer in people with the highest levels of vitamin D compared with the lowest levels. In the future we will be hearing much more about the beneficial effects of adequate amounts of vitamin D\(^5\).

Another area in which Vitamin D is important is in maintaining the balance of the immune system. In autoimmune diseases the immune system gets confused and begins to attack part of the body. While it may still may still attack bacteria, viruses, or cancer it also attacks organs or tissues that should be left alone. There are different names for the diseases in which the immune system attacks different tissues: Lupus (skin and kidney), Hashimoto’s thyroiditis (thyroid), Type 1 diabetes (Beta cells in pancreas), multiple sclerosis (nerve insulation), rheumatoid arthritis (joints), and others. Epidemiologic studies are teaching us that people who have low vitamin D intake or blood levels are more likely to have this type of disease.

Recent scientific reports have brought to light evidence that there are many people who are actually deficient in this important hormone. Deficiency may manifest itself in a multitude of little symptoms or may actually be incapacitating. Symptoms may include one or more of the following symptoms: thirst, drinking a lot, urinating a lot, stomach ulcers, pancreatitis, constipation, vomiting, weight loss, spontaneous bone fractures, osteoporosis, joint pains, gout, soft tissue calcifications, fatigue, apathy, anxiety, depression, psychosis, sleepiness, coma, muscle fatigue, weakness, poor muscle tone, psoriasis, and even hypertension. The diagnosis of deficiency is easy for doctors to miss because the symptoms can imitate so many other things. If you have any of these symptoms you should ask your doctor to do a “25-hydroxy-vitamin D” level. The level should be greater than 20 ng/cc. There is no toxicity until the level is greater than 150 ng/cc so there is a large buffer area.

There are another group of people with what is called insufficient levels of vitamin D. These have levels between 20 and 30 ng/cc. In this range the symptoms of inadequate levels are not present but there is not enough inside the cells of the body to gain the protection from cancer and autoimmune disease. A recent report\(^6\) on NHANES (National Health And Nutrition Examination Survey done by the US government on the population every 10 years) data reveal that 90% of African Americans and approximately 50% of Caucasians have insufficient levels. This increases the risk of deadly and debilitating diseases in many Americans. Those at risk for low vitamin D levels include the elderly, the very young, people who spend most of their time indoors, the obese, those who consistently use sun-tan lotion or block when out in the sun, those who have dark skin, those who live north of the 35th latitude.

You should know your vitamin D level and you do what it takes to get it above above 30 ng/cc. If you are at risk for having insufficient

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