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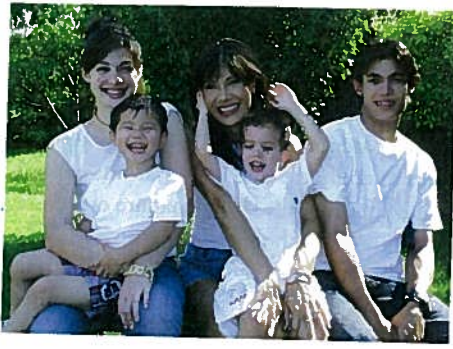
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family matters

with 12 News anchor Lin Sue Cooney

Q: Can Vitamin D deficiency cause multiple sclerosis and other auto-immune disorders?

A: Remember the “medicine” Mary Poppins doled out with a spoonful of sugar? Most likely, she was singing about cod liver oil, a source of Vitamin D. Squeamish children were spared that experience in the early 1930s, when dairies began fortifying milk with the vitamin.

Today, you can get Vitamin D from a latte or a bowl of breakfast cereal. Other sources include eggs, salmon, tuna and liver. Exposing bare skin to ultraviolet light, or the sun, also creates Vitamin D stores within the body. But despite these seemingly convenient sources of D availability, recent studies show that Americans may not be getting enough of this vitamin. Cases of rickets, a bone disease caused by Vitamin D deficiency that many assume disappeared along with the horse and buggy era, continue to be reported in the United States, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics.

But why the D deficit? Some believe it's because families tend to spend more time indoors these days, watching movies or playing video games. Kids don't run around the neighborhood with friends anymore after school. Higher levels of smog that mask the sun may also be a culprit. And in Arizona, where the sun shines most of the year, we tend to cover up with sunscreen or protective clothing because of warnings from dermatologists about the dangers of developing skin cancer.

Vitamin D facilitates calcium absorption and promotes bone mineralization; it also provides protection from many serious diseases. Mounting evidence suggests that Vitamin D protects against autoimmune diseases including multiple sclerosis, a chronic disease of the central nervous system.

Researchers from the Harvard School of Public Health found that women with the highest intake of Vitamin D through supplement use, or multivitamins, had a 40 percent lower risk of developing MS as compared to women who did not use supplements. They add that prevalence rates for MS increase for those who live in northern latitudes and may not be exposed to as much sunlight as those who live closer to the equator.

That conclusion sealed the deal for Tucson attorney Jim Dyer, 53, recently diagnosed with MS. Dyer, a personal injury lawyer,

waded through reams of research trying to find out more on how to cope with his disease, and to understand how it might be prevented in others. “I just started researching it the way I would research a case,” says Dyer. He's been trying to raise his own Vitamin D intake through foods, supplements and sunshine as a therapeutic treatment. A simple blood test measures his levels periodically. But it hasn't been easy. After age 50, it becomes harder to raise D levels in the bloodstream.

The National Institutes of Health recommend 10 to 15 minutes of exposure to sunshine to allow adequate time for Vitamin D synthesis within the body, followed by an application of SPF 15 or above sunscreen to protect the skin. Exposing the unprotected skin on your face, arms, hands or back for that brief amount of time, at least two times per week, is usually sufficient to provide adequate Vitamin D. Individuals who limit their sun exposure should make an effort to include good sources of D in their diet or consider supplements.

The American Academy of Dermatology warns that prescribing sunshine to acquire Vitamin D is irresponsible, given that ultraviolet light is known to be the primary cause of skin cancer. The organization recommends a healthy diet along with D supplements for those who are concerned about getting enough of the vitamin.

Check with your health care provider to discuss what's right for you and your family. Cod liver oil can be found at health food stores and remains a great source of Vitamin D. If only Mary Poppins were around with her spoon. And some sugar.

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Family Matters is a collaborative effort between staff writer Vicki Louk Balint and 12 News anchor Lin Sue Cooney, the mother of Taylor (20), Zachary (17), Seamus (3) and Wen (3). Send family safety- and health-related questions to familymatters@raisingarizonakids.com.

Learn more at raisingarizonakids.com

Who is most at risk for Vitamin D deficiency? Plus: a list of additional resources.