

Vitamin D and your pregnancy

Your body needs vitamin D to maintain healthy levels of calcium and phosphorus. These help build your baby's bones and teeth.

If you don't have enough vitamin D during pregnancy, your baby may be born with low vitamin D levels. This can put your baby at risk of:

- rickets (which can lead to deformed and broken bones)
- abnormal bone growth
- delayed physical development.

Getting enough vitamin D

Sun exposure is the main source of vitamin D in New Zealand.

Try to get some outdoor physical activity before 10 am or after 4 pm between September and April, and around the middle of the day between May and August. The lighter your skin, the less time you need to be in the sun to make enough vitamin D. Don't get sunburnt!

Small amounts of vitamin D can be found in foods such as:

- fatty fish (eg, canned salmon, tuna or sardines)
- eggs
- liver (but don't eat more than 100 g per week)
- some margarines, milks and yoghurts.

However, it's hard to get enough vitamin D from diet alone.

High risk

If you:

- have darker skin
- completely avoid sun exposure
- have liver or kidney disease, or
- are on certain medications (eg, anticonvulsants)

then you are at high risk of vitamin D deficiency.

If you live south of Nelson-Marlborough in winter, you're also more likely to have low levels in late winter or early spring.

Supplements for vitamin D

If you are at high risk of vitamin D deficiency, talk to your doctor, midwife or dietitian. Your doctor can prescribe a subsidised monthly 1.25 mg cholecalciferol (vitamin D) tablet throughout your pregnancy (or only over winter months if you live south of Nelson-Marlborough).

Vitamin D and your baby

Vitamin D helps our bodies use calcium to build and maintain strong bones and teeth.

Low levels of vitamin D in babies/children can cause rickets. Rickets can result in weak bones, delayed walking, bowed legs, and swollen wrists or ankles. If untreated, rickets can lead to failure to grow, deformed or broken bones, pneumonia and seizures.

Every year a number of babies/children in New Zealand are diagnosed with rickets.

Sources of vitamin D

Vitamin D is known as the 'sunshine vitamin' because our bodies can make it from the sun. When the skin is exposed to sunlight, the ultraviolet B (UVB) rays from the sun are used to make vitamin D.

However, babies can't safely get the vitamin D they need from the sun. Their skin is very sensitive and should not be exposed to direct sunlight.

Breast milk is the ideal and recommended food for your baby but it is not a good source of vitamin D.

High risk

If your baby is breastfed **and**:

- has naturally dark skin
- was born preterm with a body weight less than 2.5 kg
- you have been told that you are low in vitamin D, or
- one or more of your children has had rickets or seizures resulting from low blood calcium levels

then he/she is at high risk of vitamin D deficiency.

Babies who are breastfed over winter months in New Zealand may also be vitamin D deficient by late winter/spring.

Supplements for babies at risk of deficiency

If your baby is at high risk of vitamin D deficiency, talk to a health professional such as your doctor, midwife or dietitian. Your doctor can prescribe a vitamin D supplement that comes in drops.

Drops can either be:

- put on your nipple before your baby latches on
- given directly into your baby's mouth using a dropper.