

Why COVID makes it more important than ever that pregnant (and breastfeeding) women take vitamin D

3 November 2020, by Hazel Flight



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Vitamin D, often known as the "sunshine vitamin," is normally obtained through exposure of our [skin to the sun](#). The Department of Health recommends that everyone in the UK should take a supplement of vitamin D during the winter months (October to March), as there is insufficient UV light for our bodies to manufacture vitamin D.

This advice was also recently extended during the COVID pandemic, for people who were self-isolating during the summer months—who were advised to take [vitamin D supplements daily](#).

Vitamin D is also an essential supplement for pregnant women as it helps to aid calcium and phosphorous metabolism, which are necessary for fetal skeletal growth. Adequate vitamin D and calcium status during pregnancy are also associated with [decreased risk](#) of pre-eclampsia, low birthweight, poor postnatal growth, bone fragility, an increased incidence of [autoimmune diseases](#) and gestational diabetes. This is a condition where high blood sugar (glucose) develops during pregnancy. BAME women and those with a BMI greater than 30 are at an [increased risk](#).

People from some ethnic minority groups are particularly at risk of vitamin D deficiency, due to increased levels of melanin in the skin—as this reduces absorption of [vitamin D from sunlight](#). People with a BMI of more than 30 are also at increased risk of the deficiency. And emerging research also indicates that supplementing with the recommended daily dose (10 ug) may [not be enough for both these groups](#).

So as we are now approaching a long, dark, socially-isolated winter in the UK, adequate vitamin D supplementation has never been more important. This is particularly the case for [pregnant women](#). Especially those with darker skin or a BMI over 30. This is not only for fetal and [maternal health](#) but also to reduce the risk of compromised immunity.

Importance of vitamin D

Vitamin D deficiency is very common—with about one billion people around the world thought to be [deficient](#). The signs and symptoms of vitamin D deficiency can include muscle weakness and fatigue along with [bone pain and weakness](#). Some [further studies](#) have also linked vitamin D deficiency with [depression](#).

Vitamin D also has an essential role in supporting the [immune system](#) – triggering the immune cells to produce [antibodies](#). So people who are deficient in vitamin D may be [immunocompromised](#) and more [prone to infections](#).

This is of course particularly relevant during the COVID-19 pandemic, as research has indicated that people who have [sub-optimal vitamin D](#) may be more [susceptible to the virus](#).

There has also been some [speculation](#) that the higher proportion of deaths among [overweight](#) and

BAME people in the UK may be related to low [vitamin D](#) levels.

Provided by The Conversation

This is why the Department of Health has increased its [public health](#) messaging around the importance of [vitamin D supplementation](#). Indeed, scientists have also recently suggested that vitamin D should be [added to bread and milk](#) to help fight COVID-19.

Nutritional support

For many women, pregnancy is a time of increased nutritional awareness and the motivation to do what's right for themselves and their baby. So this means, from a public [health](#) perspective, it's also a window of opportunity to impart nutritional messages to a mother and the family.

Midwives can have an effective role in helping to educate women on the benefits of healthy eating and appropriate [nutritional supplements during pregnancy](#). But research shows that many midwives feel they lack adequate knowledge or confidence to [fulfill this role](#). And [time constraints and conflicting information](#) can also make this difficult. My research into this area has also found this to be true—68% of the midwives I spoke with said they lacked in [time, confidence and knowledge](#).

Maybe then a more [collaborative approach](#) between midwives, nutritionists and education experts is needed. This is important because a well-balanced diet is crucial for optimum health throughout life.

Indeed, [the World Health Organization](#) has identified that the first 1,000 days—from conception until a child's second birthday—are the most influential in terms of long-term health—making good nutrition and correct supplementation during pregnancy vital. So this winter, if you are pregnant or breastfeeding, make sure you take the correct dose of [vitamin D](#)—for both you and your baby.

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