Vitamin D is known to benefit musculoskeletal health and emerging research is pointing to a possible protective effect offered against some cancers by maintaining adequate levels of this vitamin.

Although Canadians are being faced with two options to maintain vitamin D levels - taking vitamin D through vitamin supplements is the optimum way to obtain vitamin D. (Food sources do not provide sufficient supplies.)

- Most people receive enough UVB radiation from the sun to enable vitamin D synthesis simply by going about their daily activities during the spring and summer months. Very brief amounts of sun exposure appear to be required to maintain optimal vitamin D levels, probably in the region of a few minutes a day, although the exact amount for each individual is as yet unknown. There is no need to seek increased or prolonged sun exposure. During the winter months, a vitamin supplement should be taken.

- Canadians should avoid increasing their sun exposure since there is strong evidence that UV radiation from the sun is the prime cause of skin cancer. The importance of skin cancer should not be minimized – melanoma will cause the death of 940 people in Canada in 2009 and figures are on the rise. Basal cell and squamous cell carcinomas are rarely fatal. They do require timely treatment, which can cause pain and may leave a disfiguring scar. These skin cancers are so common that they represent an enormous cost to the health care system. Yet these diseases are preventable to a great extent.

- Use of indoor tanning to promote vitamin D production increases a person’s risk of developing skin cancer. The CDA, along with Health Canada and the World Health Organization (WHO), strongly recommend that tanning beds not be used.

In summary: In order to lessen the health risks associated with skin cancer yet still reap the known and possible benefits of vitamin D, the CDA recommends people concerned about vitamin D levels take 1,000 units of vitamin D supplements a day, particularly during the Canadian winter. These are safe to use and equally effective as the sun in maintaining healthy levels of this vitamin in the body while avoiding the risk of getting skin cancer.

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