

# Vitamin D – Advice following a melanoma diagnosis

Information for patients, relatives and carers

① For more information, please contact:

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## **Why have I been given this leaflet?**

You have recently received a diagnosis of melanoma. This leaflet provides advice on protecting yourself from the sun while at the same time ensuring you maintain adequate vitamin D levels.

Vitamin D is a hormone, produced in response to sun absorption between April and October and is essential for general health and wellbeing.

Vitamin D can also be absorbed from your diet. Oily fish such as salmon, sardines and mackerel as well as egg yolks, beef liver and mushrooms are all good sources of vitamin D. Some cereals and dairy products are also fortified with vitamin D.

# **Sun protection and vitamin D**

Following your melanoma diagnosis you will have been advised to reduce your sun exposure. It is important to protect your skin from sun damage for the following reasons:

- Sunburn may affect your body's natural defences against melanoma by preventing the immune system from functioning effectively.
- Sun exposure will increase the risk of developing a further melanoma. One in 10 melanoma patients will go on to develop further melanomas.

## **What should I do to keep myself safe?**

- Avoid long periods of direct exposure to the sun's harmful ultra-violet rays.
- Avoid tanning and sunburn.
- Do not use a sunbed.
- Avoid the sun between the hours of 11.00am and 3pm, seeking shade where possible.
- Use a sun cream with a sun protection factor (SPF) of 30 or above and a UVA star rating of four or more stars. Keep a note of when you buy the sun cream as the protection will decrease with time. The average life span of sun cream is six to 12 months after opening.
- Use protective clothing to protect your skin where possible, such as long sleeves and a wide brimmed hat.
- Get your vitamin D level checked by your hospital team (not your GP). Recommended vitamin D levels in melanoma patients differ to that of the general public. This will help you to find out if you need a vitamin D supplement or if you need to stop the supplement you are already taking.

## **Vitamin D**

Reducing sun exposure will reduce your body's capacity to produce vitamin D. Vitamin D plays an important role in the maintenance of healthy bones and muscles. It is also thought to have other positive effects, including benefits for the immune system, improving mood and energy levels.

It is advisable for melanoma patients to maintain their vitamin D level within an optimal range of 50 – 90 nmol/L. Following your initial blood test your consultant or nurse will write to you to advise of your vitamin D level and any supplementation required.

## **What is an adequate vitamin D level for melanoma patients?**

- Ideal levels – between 50-90nmol/L.
- Very low levels – equal to or less than 25nmol/L.
- Moderately low levels – more than 25nmol/L but less than 50nmol/L.

Levels above 90nmol/L are considered to be high. This may be a result of having a recent sunny holiday. In this instance, the level should come down gradually over a relatively short period of time.

If you have not been on a sunny holiday and are not taking Vitamin D capsules and your level is high, this may be because you are getting vitamin D from other sources, such as your diet.

Where levels are higher than 90nmol/L due to taking vitamin D supplements, the supplements should be stopped.

High levels of vitamin D can lead to excessive amounts of calcium being released into the blood stream (hypercalcemia). This can cause a range of symptoms including pain, nausea, vomiting, muscle weakness, confusion, kidney stones and irregular heartbeats.

## **What is the advice if my vitamin D level is low?**

Patients with low vitamin D levels (less than 50nmol/L) will be advised to commence a vitamin D3 supplement without added calcium. The vitamin D3 capsules should contain a vitamin D dose of 400 international units (IU)/10 micrograms. You can buy these over the counter at any supermarket, health food shop or pharmacy. Your consultant or clinical nurse specialist will advise you how many capsules to take.

Vitamin D3 is recommended over vitamin D2. Both D2 and D3 will raise your vitamin D levels, however research suggests that D3 is slightly more effective. Please be aware vitamin D2 comes from plant sources and vitamin D3 comes from animal sources which may affect your choice if you are vegetarian or vegan. In this instance, please speak to your consultant or specialist nurse for advice.

It is important not to take vitamin D supplements containing calcium as this could result in your blood calcium levels becoming abnormally high.

If your blood test shows normal vitamin D levels then no supplementation is required. Your bloods will be rechecked six months after the baseline level to ensure they have reached or remain within the optimal range.

## **What is the advice for families?**

If you have been affected by melanoma this results in a higher risk for direct relatives. This is because melanoma is more likely to occur in people with fair skin that burns easily and those that have lots of moles. As similar skin types tend to run through families, this increases risk within these families.

Families often share similar lifestyle choices, for example, outdoor hobbies or working which may also result in an increased risk.

National guidance for the UK population is for all residents aged five and above, unless advised otherwise for medical reasons, to take a 400IU (10mcg) vitamin D supplement daily throughout the winter months (November – March) for general health and wellbeing. For further advice please see [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)



## **Tell us what you think of this leaflet**

We hope that you found this leaflet helpful. If you would like to tell us what you think, please contact: Skin Cancer Clinical Nurse Specialist Team, Specialist Nurse Office, Corridor A, York Hospital, Wigginton Road, York, YO31 8HE.

Advice Line: 01904 721719

Email: [yhs-tr.skincancer.cns.team@nhs.net](mailto:yhs-tr.skincancer.cns.team@nhs.net)

## **Teaching, training and research**

Our Trust is committed to teaching, training and research to support the development of health and healthcare in our community. Healthcare students may observe consultations for this purpose. You can opt out if you do not want students to observe. We may also ask you if you would like to be involved in our research.

## **Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)**

PALS offers impartial advice and assistance to patients, their relatives, friends and carers. We can listen to feedback (positive or negative), answer questions and help resolve any concerns about Trust services.

PALS can be contacted on 01904 726262, or email [yhs-tr.patientexperienceteam@nhs.net](mailto:yhs-tr.patientexperienceteam@nhs.net).

An answer phone is available out of hours.

# Leaflets in alternative languages or formats

If you would like this information in a different format, including braille or easy read, or translated into a different language, please speak to a member of staff in the ward or department providing your care.

Patient Information Leaflets can be accessed via the Trust's Patient Information Leaflet website:

[www.yorkhospitals.nhs.uk/your-visit/patient-information-leaflets/](http://www.yorkhospitals.nhs.uk/your-visit/patient-information-leaflets/)

Owner	Skin cancer clinical nurse specialist
Date first issued	February 2020
Review Date	June 2028
Version	3 (issued June 2025)
Approved by	Skin Cancer MDT
Document Reference	PIL1417 v3
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