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According to experts at the American Academy of Dermatology, supplements – not increased exposure to natural or artificial ultraviolet (UV) light – should be the preferred remedy for vitamin D deficiencies.

DIETARY SUPPLEMENTS ARE THE SAFEST WAY TO INCREASE VITAMIN D LEVELS

There is growing evidence that many people in the northern hemisphere, especially the elderly and darker-skinned individuals, may be lacking sufficient vitamin D. Recent research indicates that vitamin D deficiencies are even more widespread than previously thought. The benefits of vitamin D are well-documented and include improved bone health and fracture prevention, better muscle health, and a reduced risk of falling in older individuals.

Since vitamin D is naturally produced in the body through exposure to UV radiation, many people have sought to increase their vitamin D levels through tanning beds and increased exposure to sunlight. Some popular Web sites and health experts have gone as far as advising people to avoid sunscreens altogether and that increased exposure to sun could help remedy such deficiencies.

However, experts recently gathered by the American Academy of Dermatology Association say that recommending increased exposure to sunlight is very irresponsible. Findings from the conference white paper were published in the May 2005 issue of the *Journal of the American Academy of Dermatology*. Authors of the report noted that photosynthesizing vitamin D through natural sunlight is typically maximized after about 20 minutes of ultraviolet B (UVB) exposure, with extended sun exposure providing no additional benefit but instead increasing the likelihood of photodamage and skin cancer.

The scientists noted that there is now plenty of evidence proving that vitamin D does not need to be produced from UVB exposure to be effective. Additionally, while vitamin D levels can safely be boosted by nutritional supplementation, repeated and intentional UV exposure is known to significantly increase the risk of developing skin cancer.

Low to moderate exposure to sunlight has many potential benefits, including conversion of vitamin D in the skin. However, experts caution against misleading information that elevated exposure to natural sunlight or tanning beds are safer ways to increase vitamin D levels than foods or nutritional supplements.

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