Vitamin D: cancer-fighting superhero

The headlines were unequivocal: if you live in the northern latitudes—and we all do, in Canada—you may be able to cut your risk for cancer in half by increasing your intake of vitamin D.

Research published in the American Journal of Clinical Nutrition in June 2007 found that women with lower vitamin D intake showed greater risk for cancer. The four-year, double-blind, randomized trial looked at cancer risk in nearly 1,200 healthy post-menopausal women. Study subjects were given a placebo, a calcium supplement alone, or a combination of vitamin D (1,100 IU daily) and calcium supplements (1,400 to 1,500 IU daily); risk for cancer was halved in the combination-D-and-calcium group, compared to the placebo group.

In response to this study and others that have correlated vitamin D to a decreased risk for colorectal and prostate cancers, the Canadian Cancer Society (CCS) is now recommending that adults living in Canada consider supplementing with 1,000 IU of vitamin D daily during the fall and winter months (when the sun’s rays are weaker)—more than double the previously recommended dosage. Health Canada had previously suggested an adequate intake for adults 19 to 70 years old of between 200 and 400 IU daily.

According to Heather Logan, the CCS’s director of cancer control policy, "The current evidence suggests [the 1,000 IU daily dose] will help reduce cancer risk with the least potential for harm.” Vitamin D is also known to play an important role in preventing osteoporosis and multiple sclerosis and helping relieve joint damage due to arthritis.

Although we can also get vitamin D through sun exposure during the summer months, the Cancer Society has not reversed its statements on avoiding unprotected sun because of the concomitant risks for skin cancer. While the Society recommends getting our daily dose of vitamin D from supplements, good food sources include butter, mushrooms, cod liver oil, eggs, tuna, mackerel, salmon, and sardines.

A few days after the CCS announced its recommendations, vitamin D supplements were flying off the shelves and demand was outpacing supply in many stores across Canada.

—Susan Safyan