

Sunlight is good for you again

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Western researchers say it
can help fight cancer, protect against heart disease

By JOHN MINER, SUN MEDIA

Long considered the bad boy of cancer, sunlight is experiencing a reputation reversal with more evidence published this month showing it can actually be a cancer fighter and protect against heart disease.

But health experts say the research is no reason to throw away the sunscreen and strip down to the buff because the risk of skin cancer remains.

“It is a fine balancing act,” said Dr. Lyn Guenther, professor of dermatology at the University of Western Ontario and medical director of the Guenther Dermatology Research Centre.

Two studies published in scientific journals in the past two weeks have helped brighten the health perception of sunlight.

One in the journal of the American Heart Association linked heart disease and high blood pressure with a worldwide vitamin D deficiency caused by lack of sun exposure and inadequate diets.

Another in the U.S. National Academy of Sciences found that while solar radiation is the main cause of skin cancers, the vitamin D it creates may increase the likelihood of surviving cancer.

The latest two studies are on top of other recent studies that have suggested vitamin D, created when sunlight hits your skin, can reduce risk of colorectal cancer, multiple sclerosis, type 1 diabetes and rheumatoid arthritis.

The mounting evidence is expected to prompt a change in the recommended amount of vitamin D intake for individuals, said Heather Thomas, a dietitian with the Middlesex-London Health Unit.

“I am anticipating that within this year we will see some changes,” Thomas said.

In addition to sunlight, people can get vitamin D through their diet, either by consuming foods that have vitamin D or by taking supplements.

Milk, for instance, has vitamin D added to it and it is naturally occurring in sardines, mackerel, tuna, salmon and egg yolks, Thomas said.

But she cautions too much vitamin D can cause liver damage.

For most people, natural sunlight should produce enough vitamin D, Guenther said.

“You basically need five minutes to five per cent of your body surface area, two or three times a week. This could be sunlight to the back of your hands, to your arms, to your face or your back,” she said.

“If you think of the average person going to and from work, most people would have five minutes easily in a day just walking between their car.”

The body also puts its own cap on vitamin D production and won't produce any additional amounts after 20 minutes of sunlight exposure, Guenther said.

The indoor tanning industry has pounced on the latest research to support people using their facilities, but Guenther said the beneficial light that produces vitamin d is ultraviolet-b radiation. Most tanning beds have 95 per cent ultraviolet-A radiation that doesn't produce vitamin D and only five per cent ultraviolet-B light.

“If people are going to tanning parlours to get their vitamin D it is probably not the best way to get it,” Guenther said.