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Millions of Children In U.S. Found to Be Lacking Vitamin D Links to Diabetes, Heart Disease Examined

By [Rob Stein](#)
Washington Post Staff Writer
Monday, August 3, 2009

Millions of U.S. children have disturbingly low Vitamin D levels, possibly increasing their risk for bone problems, heart disease, diabetes and other ailments, according to two new studies that provide the first national assessment of the crucial nutrient in young Americans.

About 9 percent of those ages 1 through 21 -- about 7.6 million children, adolescents and young adults -- have Vitamin D levels so low they could be considered deficient, while an additional 61 percent -- 50.8 million -- have higher levels, but still low enough to be insufficient, according to the analysis of federal data being released Monday.

"It's astounding," said Michal L. Melamed of the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York, who helped conduct one of the studies published online by the journal *Pediatrics*. "At first, we couldn't believe the numbers. I think it's very worrisome."

Low Vitamin D levels are especially common among girls, adolescents and people with darker skin, according to the analysis of a nationally representative sample of more than 6,000 children. For example, 59 percent of African American teenage girls were Vitamin D deficient, Melamed's study found.

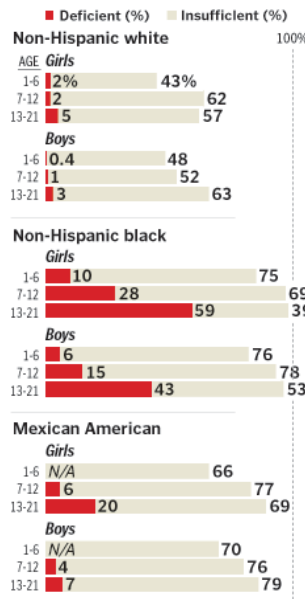
The researchers and others blamed the low levels on a combination of factors, including children spending more time watching television and playing video games instead of going outside, covering up and using sunscreen when they do go outdoors, and drinking more soda and other beverages instead of consuming milk and other foods fortified with Vitamin D.

"This appears to be another result of our unhealthy lifestyles, including a sedentary society that doesn't go out in the sun much," Melamed said.

The analysis and an accompanying federal study also found an association between low Vitamin D levels and increased risk for high blood pressure, high blood sugar, and a condition that increases the risk for heart disease and diabetes, known as the metabolic syndrome.

Taken together, the studies provide new evidence that low Vitamin D levels may be putting a generation of children at increased risk for heart disease and diabetes, two of the nation's biggest health problems that are also increased by the childhood obesity epidemic.

Advertisement "These are very important studies," said Richard S. Rivlin, a past president of the American Society for Clinical Nutrition who was not involved in the research. "They show the number of people who have high rates of Vitamin D deficiency is really very frightening."



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Other researchers urged caution.

"The bottom line is that these numbers are interesting," said Frank R. Greer of the University of Wisconsin at Madison, who served on a panel that recently doubled the American Academy of Pediatrics recommendations for daily Vitamin D intake. "But I'm not ready to make a great hue and cry until we have more data. I think we should use them for further research to determine their significance."

The findings come as the National Academy of Sciences Institute of Medicine is reviewing the federal government's official guidelines for recommended daily intake of Vitamin D. A public hearing is scheduled as part of that process at the National Academy of Sciences in Washington on Tuesday.

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