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Insufficient vitamin D tied to severe asthma attacks

NEW YORK | Wed Jun 23, 2010 3:28pm EDT

(Reuters Health) - Asthmatic children with low vitamin D levels in their blood may have a greater risk of suffering severe asthma attacks, those with higher levels of the vitamin, a study suggests.

The study, which followed more than 1,000 children with asthma over four years, found those with vitamin-D "insufficiency" at the start were more likely to have an asthma attack that required a trip to the emergency room. Over the four-year study, 38 percent of children with insufficient vitamin D levels went to the emergency room or were hospitalized for asthma exacerbation. The same was true of 32 percent of children with sufficient levels of the vitamin.

When the researchers considered other factors -- including the children's asthma at the study's start, their weight and family income -- vitamin D insufficiency itself was linked to a 5 percent increase in the risk of severe asthma attacks.

Researchers led by Dr. Augusto A. Litongua, of Harvard Medical School in Boston, report the findings in the *Journal of Allergy & Clinical Immunology*.

As it stands, people are considered to have an overt deficiency when blood levels drop below 11 nanograms per milliliter.

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is debate over how the optimal vitamin D level should be and what the daily recommended intake of the vitamin should be for children and adults.

Some experts believe that vitamin D blood levels above 30 ng/mL and that levels between deficiency and 30 ng/mL should be sufficient.

For their study, Litongua and his colleagues considered blood levels of 20 ng/mL or lower to be insufficient in the vitamin.

The researchers based their findings on 1,024 children from a clinical trial testing two inhaled asthma medications. In samples taken at the start of the trial, Litongua's team found 10 percent of children with vitamin D insufficiency, and 65 percent had sufficient levels.

Overall, the researchers found no evidence that sufficient vitamin D levels reduced moderate asthma symptoms; in fact, children with low levels had more moderate symptoms.

However, these children were at greater risk of severe asthma attacks.

While the findings point to an association between vitamin D and asthma, they do not prove that vitamin D is responsible -- or, by extension, that low vitamin D causes asthma attacks.

It is biologically plausible that vitamin D would affect the immune system, Litongua and his colleagues say.

Vitamin D may be best known for its role in healthy bone metabolism, but it is also needed for normal nerve, muscle and immune system function. Low vitamin D levels are associated with a higher risk of type 1 diabetes, heart disease and certain cancers.

The effects of vitamin D on the immune system, which includes fighting off infections, might help explain why higher levels of the vitamin are associated with fewer asthma exacerbations, according to Litongua's team.

They say it's also possible that vitamin D enhances the production of certain hormones -- both the body's natural supply and the synthetic ones used in asthma treatments.

In this study, the beneficial association between vitamin D and asthma was seen in children who were on budesonide, a corticosteroid.

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that children get 400 IU of vitamin D each day. Milk, breakfast cereals and orange juice are the main food sources, though some fatty fish naturally contain the vitamin. The researchers recommend vitamin pills for children who do not get enough from their diet.

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Vitamin D is naturally synthesized in the skin when it is exposed to sunlight, but long winters and sun avoidance in the summer mean that many kids may not get enough vitamin D this way. In addition, vitamin D synthesis is less efficient in people with darker skin, and African Americans are at higher risk of deficiency than whites.

Overweight children and adults also appear to be at elevated risk of deficiency because vitamin D is stored in body fat. The more vitamin D that gets sequestered into fat tissue, the less active vitamin there is in the blood.

SOURCE: [here](#)(10)00657-3/abstract

Journal of Allergy & Clinical Immunology, online June 10, 2010.

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