

Our Doctor Writes

February 2010

I've read an interesting article this week about vitamin D levels in older people. The levels tend to be low and we know that long term low vitamin D levels can lead to problems with bones. In children this causes a problem called osteomalacia. The growing bones are unable to incorporate enough calcium so the bones struggle to ever become strong enough. In older people low levels of vitamin D can contribute to osteoporosis where developed bones are thinned and become weak. Many things can contribute to osteoporosis such as family history, high alcohol intake, smoking, lack of exercise and drugs such as steroids. Low vitamin D levels can be caused by poor dietary intake and also by lack of sun exposure. Asian women are particularly affected by lack of vitamin D related to lack of sunshine. This is in part due to northern levels of sunlight, skin colour and traditional clothing that blocks out any available sunlight. The interesting observation made in this recent article in the British Medical Journal was that low levels of vitamin D lead to muscle weakness and that it may be this rather than weak bones that contribute to fractured hips due to falls in the elderly. Vitamin D levels can be boosted by increasing the intake of foods high in vitamin D as well as taking supplements such as cod liver oil. If you have osteoporosis or are at high risk for it then it may be appropriate to be prescribed calcium and vitamin D by your GP.

In Bedwyn we have been motivated by our patient group to try to develop a new resource for patients. Their suggestion was that we encourage people to use their health experiences for the benefit of others. When an individual is affected by an illness it can be daunting, frightening and bring all sorts of other emotions and problems. Professionals like doctors can help with their expertise but the ear and support of someone with direct experience of an illness can be invaluable. Between us we would like to build a library of willing patients who are prepared to act as mentors or buddies to others who have similar problems. If you are reading this and thinking what have I got to offer, never underestimate the power of just being there for someone and sharing your experience. Confidentiality is obviously key with a project like this. If you would like to take part and become a member of our patient "library" please get in touch with Keith Marshall my practice manager at Great Bedwyn Surgery. He can be contacted in person, by telephone.

With Best Wishes,

Dr Tim Ballard