

Nutrition Rules!

The Sunshine Vitamin

Here's a GP with a holistic approach, one who highlights the value of exposure to sunshine, underlines the importance of vitamin D for so many aspects of our health, and dots both of the i's in "nutrition". The soft-spoken DR HUI VOON LOO talked to Verne Maree about her special interest in nutritional medicine as part of a well-rounded family practice.

I caught up with Dr Loo at the CHI clinic in leafy Rochester Park. What came first, I wondered, her interest in nutritional medicine or her joining the well-known holistic practice? But she's quick to confirm that she was attracted to CHI because its founder, Dr Kim Hayes, has such a deep interest in this field.

Tell us a bit about your background.

I did my medical training at University College Dublin, and then worked for a while in Singapore before moving to Toronto, Canada, where I lived for some time. Last year, family reasons brought me, my husband and our three-year-old son back to Singapore, and I joined CHI. One thing I've learnt from my overseas experience is that there's no one right or wrong way of practising medicine; it's practised differently in different societies and in different healthcare systems.

What's it like to work with CHI's team of holistically oriented GPs?

There are so many advantages to working with a group of colleagues, each of whom has different types of experience; there's a lot of discussion between us and we are continually exchanging information.

Our approach to patients here is a bit different, too. We deliver medicine in the way I like it to be delivered: taking the whole person into account, rather than merely prescribing medicine for a particular symptom. We get to the bottom of what is causing his or her un-wellness.

Preach to the converted! – explain why sunlight is so good for us.

There's so much that is good about sunlight, so many connections between light and health, and science is discovering more of these every day. By now, everyone should know that we need to expose our bare skin to sunlight – making sure never to burn, of course! – in order for it to make the vitamin D that is then absorbed naturally into the body. Direct midday sunlight remains by far the best source of this ultra-important nutrient.

Not only that, but exposure to bright midday sunlight also plays a part in regulating the sleep cycle, and a good night's sleep is vital for good health. What's more, vitamin D is involved in the regulation of many different genes that govern the functioning of every tissue in the body – including bone metabolism, immune system function and neuromuscular activity.

Low levels of vitamin D have been connected not only with osteoporosis, autoimmunity diseases such as Hashimoto's thyroiditis, rheumatoid arthritis and multiple sclerosis, but also with metabolic syndrome, the cluster of conditions that predispose us to diabetes and cardiovascular disease.

So we're lucky to live near the Equator, right?

We are. Year-round sunshine is one of our best assets here in the tropics, and it's free! Unfortunately, though, most of us don't take advantage of that fact, and we don't get nearly enough sunshine.

Our lifestyle is partly to blame: we're in the car or on the train, we sit all day in an office, and by the time we leave the office it's 6pm or later and the sun is going down. Even I only manage to get outside during the day on the weekends – but I do try my best to do that!

What about a vitamin D supplement?

If you're not able to get enough sunshine for whatever reason, a vitamin D supplement is the second-best source; but check the label to make sure it's in the more bio-available, active D3 form (not D2). You get some vitamin D from food, too, but it would be very difficult to get enough.

What's your approach to supplements in general?

Supplementation is a very individual thing. Just because one of your friends does well on a particular supplement – be it folate, glucosamine, CoQ10 or whatever – doesn't mean that you necessarily will, or that the same amount will necessarily be right for you. It's important to get the right supplements and to get the dosage right, too, for each person's individual needs.

Taking a daily multivitamin is unlikely to do any harm and might do you some good. But because it has limited amounts of any one particular nutrient, you may not experience any difference in your wellbeing; it may not provide enough of what you may be lacking. Also, each nutrient works within a complex system, where all the nutrients need to be in balance. It's hard – and seldom useful – to try to give a good general recommendation.

Just how do you assess nutritional deficiencies? Blood tests?

Sometimes yes; vitamin D levels can be checked in this way. But for many nutrients, there are no blood tests available to assess deficiency; instead, we use clinical assessment tools and clinical history to formulate an overall picture of the patient; from that, we get an idea what the problem could be.

Nowadays, we may also be able to detect genetic changes and variations in our patients that give us clues as to where a problem may lie.

What's your advice for a healthy diet?

The key is to eat whole foods, including good fats such as coconut oil, olive oil and avocados, and to avoid highly processed food and refined sugars. If you must cook at a high heat, use coconut oil: it's stable enough not to be transformed into a transfat.

Again, however, a diet that works well for one person may not be right for another. For example, though fresh fruit is generally healthy, someone who is prone to diabetes or metabolic syndrome might be better off sticking to one or two pieces a day.

Do you cook at home?

Yes, we juice in the mornings, and I cook almost every evening – mainly Asian soups, stews and stir fries with plenty of vegetables. I choose organic when I can, but it can be pricey, so we just do our best. Apart from helping to ensure a nutritious diet, I believe that eating at home also brings the family together. 🍴



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