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Posted Date: 7 October 2024

doi: 10.20944/preprints202410.0425.v1

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Article

# A Narrative Review of the Role of Vitamin D in Bone Health: Implications for Young Adults

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**Abstract:** Background: Vitamin D is essential for bone health, influencing bone mineral density (BMD) and the prevention of bone-related disorders. Despite its importance, Vitamin D deficiency remains prevalent among young adults, raising concerns about its impact on skeletal health. Objective: This review aims to summarize the current understanding of Vitamin D's role in bone health, focusing on its effects on BMD in young adults, and to identify gaps in the existing literature. Methods: A comprehensive narrative review of recent studies and guidelines was conducted, covering Vitamin D synthesis, its impact on bone health, dietary recommendations, and public health implications. Data were sourced from PubMed, Google Scholar, and relevant clinical guidelines.

**Keywords:** vitamin D; bone mineral density; young adults; supplementation; bone health

## Introduction

Vitamin D is a fat-soluble vitamin that plays a critical role in the regulation of calcium and phosphorus in the body, which are vital for maintaining healthy bones and teeth. Unlike many other vitamins, vitamin D can be synthesized by the body when the skin is exposed to sunlight, specifically ultraviolet B (UVB) rays. It is also found in certain foods, such as fatty fish, fortified dairy products, and egg yolks, and is available as a dietary supplement.

## Role in Bone Health

Vitamin D is essential for bone health primarily because it facilitates the absorption of calcium in the intestines. Calcium is the primary mineral found in bones, and without adequate vitamin D, the body cannot absorb sufficient calcium from the diet, leading to weakened bones and a higher risk of fractures. Vitamin D also works in tandem with parathyroid hormone (PTH) to maintain calcium balance in the blood. When calcium levels are low, PTH increases, promoting the conversion of vitamin D to its active form, calcitriol. Calcitriol then increases calcium absorption from the intestines and reduces calcium excretion by the kidneys, ensuring that enough calcium is available for bone formation and maintenance.

In children, severe vitamin D deficiency can lead to rickets, a condition characterized by soft, weak bones, resulting in skeletal deformities such as bowed legs. In adults, a similar deficiency can cause osteomalacia, which leads to bone pain and an increased risk of fractures. Long-term vitamin D deficiency also contributes to osteoporosis, a condition where bones become brittle and fragile due to a loss of bone mass, making them more susceptible to fractures.

## Role in Metabolism

Vitamin D is also intricately involved in broader aspects of metabolism beyond bone health. Its role in calcium and phosphate homeostasis is a critical component of metabolic processes. Vitamin D receptors are present in almost every cell in the body, suggesting that its influence extends beyond bone health.

In metabolism, vitamin D is crucial for maintaining proper muscle function. Muscle weakness and pain are common symptoms of vitamin D deficiency, which can increase the risk of falls and related injuries, particularly in older adults. Adequate levels of vitamin D improve muscle strength, balance, and physical performance.

Moreover, emerging research suggests that vitamin D may play a role in the prevention of chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and certain cancers. It is believed to have anti-inflammatory and immunomodulatory effects, potentially influencing immune system function and reducing the risk of autoimmune diseases. For instance, vitamin D modulates the immune response by enhancing the pathogen-fighting effects of monocytes and macrophages—white blood cells that are important parts of the immune defense—and decreasing inflammation.

In terms of metabolic health, vitamin D has been linked to glucose metabolism. Some studies suggest that vitamin D may improve insulin sensitivity, which is critical for the regulation of blood sugar levels. Low vitamin D levels have been associated with an increased risk of type 2 diabetes, although more research is needed to fully understand this relationship.

### **Synthesis and Activation**

The synthesis of vitamin D begins in the skin, where UVB rays convert 7-dehydrocholesterol to previtamin D<sub>3</sub>, which is then converted to vitamin D<sub>3</sub> (cholecalciferol). Vitamin D<sub>2</sub> (ergocalciferol), another form of vitamin D, is obtained from plant sources. Both D<sub>2</sub> and D<sub>3</sub> are converted in the liver to 25-hydroxyvitamin D (calcidiol), the major circulating form of vitamin D, which is used to determine vitamin D status in the body. The final activation step occurs in the kidneys, where 25-hydroxyvitamin D is converted to 1,25-dihydroxyvitamin D (calcitriol), the biologically active form of vitamin D.

### **Deficiency and Supplementation**

Vitamin D deficiency is a global health issue, particularly in regions with limited sunlight exposure or where people have less access to vitamin D-rich foods. Risk factors for deficiency include dark skin (which reduces the skin's ability to produce vitamin D from sunlight), older age (due to decreased skin synthesis and kidney function), obesity (vitamin D is sequestered in fat tissue), and certain medical conditions such as malabsorption syndromes and chronic kidney or liver disease.

Supplementation with vitamin D can help prevent and treat deficiency, particularly in individuals at risk. The recommended daily allowance (RDA) varies by age, sex, and life stage, but generally ranges from 600 to 800 IU per day for most adults. However, in cases of deficiency, higher doses may be required under medical supervision.

In summary, vitamin D is a vital nutrient with a central role in bone health and metabolism. It ensures adequate calcium absorption, supports muscle function, modulates the immune system, and may have broader implications for chronic disease prevention. Ensuring sufficient levels of vitamin D through sunlight exposure, diet, or supplementation is essential for maintaining overall health and preventing disease.

It is obtained through both endogenous synthesis, initiated when the skin is exposed to ultraviolet B (UVB) radiation from sunlight, and from dietary sources such as fatty fish, fortified foods, and supplements. The bioavailability of vitamin D from these sources is critical, as the vitamin undergoes hydroxylation in the liver to form 25-hydroxyvitamin D, which is then converted in the kidneys to its active form, 1,25-dihydroxyvitamin D (calcitriol). Calcitriol acts as a hormone, binding to vitamin D receptors (VDR) present in various tissues, and is essential for maintaining calcium and phosphate homeostasis.

The mechanism by which vitamin D regulates calcium and phosphate metabolism is intricate and involves multiple organs. Calcitriol enhances the intestinal absorption of calcium and phosphate, ensuring that these minerals are available in sufficient quantities for bone mineralization. It stimulates the expression of calcium-binding proteins in the gut, which facilitates the efficient uptake of calcium into the bloodstream. Additionally, vitamin D influences the renal reabsorption of calcium, reducing urinary excretion and thereby conserving calcium within the body. It also acts on

osteoblasts and osteoclasts in the bone, regulating bone remodeling by promoting the formation of new bone and the resorption of old bone, a balance essential for maintaining bone density.

Vitamin D deficiency is a well-documented risk factor for bone-related disorders such as rickets in children and osteomalacia in adults, both characterized by softening of the bones due to inadequate mineralization. In the elderly, insufficient vitamin D levels are strongly associated with osteoporosis and osteopenia, conditions marked by reduced bone mass and increased fragility, leading to a higher risk of fractures. Numerous studies have demonstrated that vitamin D supplementation can significantly improve bone health by increasing bone mineral density (BMD) and reducing the incidence of fractures, particularly in populations at risk for deficiency. For instance, randomized controlled trials (RCTs) have shown that vitamin D, especially when combined with calcium, can reduce the rate of bone loss in postmenopausal women and older adults, thereby playing a crucial role in the prevention and management of osteoporosis.

The recommended daily intake of vitamin D varies according to age, sex, and life stage, but for young adults, the general guideline is around 600 to 800 IU per day, depending on factors like geographical location, skin pigmentation, and lifestyle. However, higher doses may be required for individuals with limited sun exposure or those with certain medical conditions that affect vitamin D metabolism. Current evidence supports the role of vitamin D supplementation in maintaining optimal bone health and preventing deficiencies that could lead to serious skeletal disorders. Studies underscore the importance of achieving and maintaining adequate vitamin D levels not only for bone health but also for broader health benefits, including immune function and chronic disease prevention.

Vitamin D deficiency is highly prevalent among young adults in Nepal, with several studies indicating significant public health concerns. For instance, research conducted among adult patients in tertiary care hospitals in Nepal revealed that a substantial portion of the population has serum vitamin D levels below the optimal range, reflecting a widespread deficiency. This deficiency is attributed to factors such as limited sun exposure, dietary insufficiencies, and cultural practices.

In terms of public health strategies, there is a growing emphasis on improving awareness and screening programs to identify at-risk populations early. Strategies include fortification of staple foods with vitamin D, public health campaigns promoting safe sun exposure, and the implementation of supplementation programs, particularly for high-risk groups like young adults and the elderly. For example, in some regions, there are recommendations to provide vitamin D supplements to pregnant women and children to prevent deficiencies from early stages.

The mechanism by which vitamin D controls calcium and phosphate metabolism is critical for bone health. Vitamin D enhances the absorption of calcium and phosphate from the gut, ensures appropriate levels of these minerals in the blood, and promotes bone mineralization. Without sufficient vitamin D, bones can become thin, brittle, or misshapen, leading to conditions like osteoporosis and osteopenia.

Current guidelines suggest a recommended daily intake of 600-800 IU of vitamin D for young adults, though higher doses may be necessary in individuals with risk factors for deficiency. Evidence from clinical trials supports the efficacy of vitamin D supplements in improving bone health and preventing fractures, particularly in populations with low baseline levels of the vitamin.

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