

**Women's  
Health Study**

# Update

## Update on vitamin D research

**Y**ou may have heard reports in the news about the potential health benefits of vitamin D. Should everyone be taking vitamin D? At what dose?

The answers to these questions are currently unclear. In late 2010, a report from the respected Institute of Medicine (IOM) made recommendations about the amount of vitamin D that most Americans should consume. The IOM recommended 600 international units (IU) per day for persons aged 1 to 70 years, and 800 IU per day for those aged 71 years and older. To develop its recommendation, the IOM reviewed nearly 1,000 scientific studies of vitamin D in relation to not only bone health but also other health outcomes such as cancer, heart disease, stroke, diabetes, and memory loss and cognitive decline. It concluded that there is clear evidence that vitamin D has bone benefits, but that current research is inconclusive as to whether higher vitamin D intake can decrease the risk for other chronic diseases. In other words, we simply don't know whether vitamin D supplements are beneficial in preventing diseases beyond osteoporosis or other bone disorders—nor do we know the amount of vitamin D that might be necessary to do so.

Since the IOM released its report, the role of vitamin D in preventing cancer, heart disease, and stroke has remained unclear. Recent observational

studies—that is, studies in which researchers track study participants with high intakes or blood levels of vitamin D but do not assign them to take vitamin D supplements as is done in randomized trials—have produced inconsistent results, with some studies reporting benefit and others not.

To provide answers, investigators from Brigham and Women's Hospital and Harvard Medical School recently launched a randomized trial called the VITAL study—VITamin D and Omega-3 Trial. You may recall receiving an invitation to participate in this study, and indeed several of you did choose to participate (the study is now closed to enrollment). In this trial, participants are randomly assigned to taking 2,000 IU of vitamin D a day, or matching placebo. This dose of vitamin D was determined from current studies, which suggest that this dose may be needed for non-bone benefits, including cancer, heart disease, and stroke—the primary outcomes of interest in VITAL. VITAL also is randomly assigning participants to taking 1 g of fish oil (omega-3 fatty acids) a day, or matching placebo. Current information shows that fish oil is helpful for decreasing the risk of dying in patients who have had a heart attack, but its role in preventing heart disease and mortality among generally healthy persons is unclear. Also, whether fish oil plays a role in preventing cancer among generally healthy persons is

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not known. In VITAL, participants will take their study pill for an average of 5 years. VITAL is designed to answer the question of whether vitamin D doses above the intakes recommended by the IOM can prevent cancer, heart disease, stroke, and other nonbone diseases, and its results are expected to shape future guidelines for supplemental vitamin D use.

While waiting for definitive answers from the VITAL trial, it is reasonable to adhere to the IOM recommendation for taking 800 IU of vitamin D per day (for ages 71 years and older) to optimize bone health.

## WHS by the Numbers

Recent response to "Average time per week spent walking?"

1 hour or less	39%
1-3 hours	42%
4 or more hours	19%

Amongst the 39,876 participants who began the WHS trial in 1992-95, confirmed cases:

Myocardial infarction	642
Breast cancer	2068
Stroke	828
Death	2966

Recent response to "Do you currently smoke cigarettes?"

Yes	5%
No	95%

## A call for photos

We always welcome your photos and stories and believe that WHS participants enjoy learning about each other. Although we are not able to publish all photos that we receive, we plan to continue featuring as many of our dedicated participants as possible in future newsletters. Please send a high-quality film or electronic photo, along with a brief note describing where the photo was taken, to:

Women's Health Study  
900 Commonwealth Avenue East  
Boston, Massachusetts 02215  
Telephone: 1-800-633-6911  
e-mail: [whs@partners.org](mailto:whs@partners.org)

And don't forget to visit the WHS website at <http://whs.bwh.harvard.edu>

## WHS – Snapshots and Stories



**Corinne Esau, RN**, of Delaware, Ohio writes, "I started taking dance lessons in March, 2011 at the age of 82. I lost thirty pounds in the first two months and feel great. I participate in regional dance competitions, Trophy Balls and national competitions. I have received numerous first place awards, many honors and outstanding achievement recognitions. Dancing is great fun and I plan to continue as long as I can." Corinne has been a member of the Women's Health Study since 1994.

**Carol Floriani, RN**, of Easley, South Carolina, writes, "To celebrate my 65th birthday, I visited the Grand Canyon Skywalk. Despite my lifelong fear of heights, I walked onto the plexiglass walkway, with 4,000 feet of canyon below me. The majesty of the canyon was awesome. I could see why it is a sacred place for the Hualapi Indians. The enclosed photograph was taken near the rim of the canyon, but no barriers here! As the Hualapi say, I took the experience of 'walking on air' and discovered that age has given me the freedom to maximize my life experiences and overcome my fears." Carol has been a member of the Women's Health Study since 1994.

