



New research links vitamin D deficiency with serious mental disorders

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During these dark days of winter in many parts of the country, you can't get enough vitamin D from sunlight alone. This can make you feel a little blue. Indeed, experts now recognize that low sun exposure causes Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) in millions of people.

But, as it turns out, this relatively "mild" mood disorder may be just the tip of the iceberg. New research links vitamin D deficiencies with much more serious mental disorders. Including schizophrenia.

This new research comes to us from the United Kingdom, where they have gloomy skies much of the year. Not surprisingly, they also have a vast epidemic of vitamin D deficiency.

For the study, researchers looked at the medical records of 69 psychotic patients. And compared them to 69 healthy, age-matched peers.

The researchers looked specifically at all the subjects' vitamin D levels. And they made special note of the psychotic patients' vitamin D levels at their *first episode* of psychosis (FOP). In other words, they wanted to see if the patients had low vitamin D when they experienced their *first* symptoms of serious mental illness.

Previous studies showed that psychotic patients at in-patient facilities frequently suffer from low vitamin D. But those studies used blood samples taken *after* the patient had been diagnosed with a mental disorder. And experts believe there's a good reason why these patients have low vitamin D: They don't get outside enough.

But this is the first study to look at vitamin D levels in FOP patients. And it raises the question whether low vitamin D may even play a role in "triggering" the initial episode in vulnerable people.

For their analysis, the researchers defined vitamin D (25-OHD) levels between 25 and 50 nanomoles per liter (nmol/L) as "insufficient." And they defined levels lower than 25 nmol/L as "deficient."

Overall, they found that FOP psychotic patients had significantly lower levels of vitamin D than their healthy, age-matched peers. In fact, the FOP patients were almost three times more likely to have a vitamin D deficiency.

The researchers say these findings suggest low vitamin D might indeed be a "risk factor" for psychosis. And I would agree. This is a good, solid study. But it amazes me that it's taken so long come to these conclusions. Especially considering what we already know about vitamin D and depression.

Lack of exposure to sunlight always affects mental health...

In arctic areas, the sun disappears below the horizon for months at a time. In these areas, some people suffer from a mental disorder called "Arctic hysteria." The Eskimos call it "piblokto." My professor at University of Pennsylvania, Dr. Ed Foulkes, was an anthropologist and psychiatrist who wrote a book about it.

In Canada and Alaska, and even in the upper Midwest, folks simply call it "cabin fever." It makes sense that not seeing the sun for extended periods would bother people. And even cause mood and mental changes.

The UK researchers don't appear to know about this research on the Arctic hysterias or piblokto. I makes me wonder...how can psychiatrists be "experts" on "normative" behavior in people if they aren't aware of the decades' worth of studies on "culture and personality" done by anthropologists and social scientists?

The UK researchers *do* acknowledge that the role of vitamin D in mental health is overlooked and under-researched. This deficiency is no surprise. As I recently reported, it also took 30 years, for the career experts on multiple sclerosis (MS) to begin to recognize the role of vitamin D. This, despite the known facts that men and women who live further away from the sunny equator have increasing rates of MS.

The researchers *did* point out that patients with schizophrenia often suffer from early-onset osteoporosis. And vitamin D is critical for bone health. So, clearly something is going on that warrants further study.

Without a doubt, vitamin D is very important to the mind *and* the body. Of course, the artificial distinction in mainstream medicine between the mind and the body is a major misconception that holds back true understanding of health and illness. (For example, why do we even place divisions between internal medicine and psychiatry?)

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Bottom line for you?

Make sure to take up to 5,000 IU of vitamin D at this time of year. And if you suffer from SAD, I recommend getting some getting some rays each day from a light box.

Source:

1. "Vitamin D deficiency in first episode psychosis: A case-control study," *Top of Form Schizophrenia Research* 2013; 150(2): 533-537

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