

Boosting your vitamin D during the winter months may help with libido study says...

Ever wondered why the summer months leave you feeling frisky and the winter makes you feel more like settling in with a warming cup of cocoa and a box set before bed? Winter has always encouraged us to get cozy and comfort eat but could our lack of the 'sunshine vitamin' be a reason why many of us go off sex as the nights draw in?



Diet and libido

There are many factors that can affect libido such as stress, anxiety, depression, medication, smoking, drinking, illness and being overweight. These factors can impact on the food choices we make, which in turn can affect nutrient intake and the quality of our diet. Some can even impact on the body's requirement for certain nutrients or affect their absorption in the body and the joint effect of this may have an impact on your libido.

What you eat could have an effect on your sex drive - and not just by providing vitamins, minerals or aphrodisiac foods. What you eat influences your hormone balance and following a hormone-friendly diet will help. This involves obtaining the right types of essential fatty acids - such as those found in oily fish, nuts and seeds, plenty of fruit and vegetables (at least five servings per day) and as wide a variety of wholegrains as possible. Wholegrains are a rich source of B vitamins, plant hormones and the trace minerals that are vital for both a healthy sex drive and for sexual stamina'.

Nutrients that are important for sex drive

Sexual Function	Nutrient	Food sources
Production of sex hormones, including testosterone and maintaining sex drive	Vitamin A	Liver, eggs, dairy, fish, meat, dark green leafy vegetables and orange-yellow fruits and vegetables
	Magnesium	Nuts, seeds, brown rice, wholegrains, eggs, cocoa, dark green leafy vegetables
	Selenium	Brazil nuts, broccoli, mushrooms, cabbage, onions, garlic, wholegrains, seafood
	Zinc	Red meat (especially offal), seafood (especially oysters), wholegrains, pulses, eggs and cheese
Production of sexual secretions and fertility	Vitamin C	All fruit and vegetables but especially citrus, berries, peppers, kiwi and leafy greens
	Vitamin E	Oily fish, fortified margarine and dairy products, liver, eggs
Production of energy, stamina and staying power, plus healthy circulation and blood vessel dilation	B vitamins	Yeast extracts, brown rice, wholegrain bread, seafood, poultry and meat (especially offal), pulses, nuts, eggs, dairy products, green leafy vegetables
	Iron	Red meat (especially offal), seafood, wheat germ, wholemeal bread, egg yolk, green vegetables, prunes and other dried fruit
Arousal and orgasm	Calcium	Milk, yoghurt, cheese, green vegetables, oranges, bread
	Phosphorus	Dairy products, yeast, soya beans, nuts, wholegrains, eggs, poultry, meat and fish

Vitamin D and libido

Vitamin D has been a sexy nutrient for a while now and research findings exploring its many potential health benefits seem to make the headlines on a monthly basis but could this vitamin really put the D back into desire?

Research findings have suggested that the sunshine vitamin may have a key role to play in the libido of both sexes. A study published in the journal, Clinical Endocrinology has shed further light (excuse the pun) on the possible link between vitamin D and sexual desire. The research findings have found that levels of the male sex hormone testosterone may be linked to vitamin D status and that men with adequate levels of this nutrient had more testosterone than those with lower levels. Delving deeper, researchers also found that testosterone levels dipped during the winter and peaked during the summer, implying an association between this male hormone and vitamin D.

Women may also be affected by the lack of sunshine during the winter months may also impact on levels of oestrogen. A study published in the Journal of International Urology and Nephrology found those with sexual dysfunction had lower blood levels of vitamin D. Further research has also suggested that low levels are linked to low arousal, lubrication, orgasm, satisfaction and pain.

Vitamin D and mood

Low vitamin D levels have also been associated with low mood and in particular Seasonal Affective Disorder. Vitamin D activates the genes that release of neurotransmitters, dopamine and serotonin, the lack of which is linked to depression. Low levels of testosterone have also been shown to impact on low mood and oestrogen helps to boost serotonin and other transmitters such as GABA that promote calm and happiness. It may be that low levels of vitamin D trigger a vicious cycle of low mood and libido that impact on your sex life during the winter months.

Vitamin D status in the UK

Findings from the UK National Diet and Nutrition Survey have shown from blood analysis that there's evidence of low vitamin D status in 23% of adults over the year, which increases to 40% during the winter.

How much vitamin D do we need?

The current recommendation for vitamin D is 10mcg per day as advised by Public Health England. Many experts believe this is a minimum and in the absence of sunlight a dose of 25mcg (1000IU) may be more appropriate to maintain bone, heart, brain and immune health. Older people may be recommended a higher dose of at least 50mcg (2000IU) as they process sunlight less efficiently through the skin and have a reduced ability to absorb vitamin D from the limited foods that contain this nutrient.

Can you get enough vitamin D from your diet?

At most, it's likely that you may be able to get up to 20% of your vitamin D intake from food but the rest needs to come from sunlight in the summer and supplements during the winter. Even if you're lucky enough to escape the British winter with a sunny holiday, your stores of vitamin D are not likely to last more than 4-6 weeks.

Very few foods contain vitamin D. The main source is oily fish and a little can be found naturally in eggs and mushrooms. You can also find vitamin D in fortified foods such as breakfast cereals and margarine spreads.



Vitamin D content of foods in mcg per serving

Food	Portion size	vitamin D (mcg)
Herring raw	140g	26
Sardines raw	140g	15.4
Trout raw	140g	14.8
Pilchards canned in tomato sauce	1 can	14
Kipper raw	140g	11.2
Tuna raw	140g	10.8
Salmon raw	140g	8.4
Canned salmon	half a can	8
Mushrooms	100g	5
Eggs	2 eggs	1.8
Bran flakes	30g	1.3
Children's yoghurt (petit filous)	1 pot	1.3
Flora	15g	0.75

Supplementing your diet

Supplementing your diet with the recommended 10mcg (400IU) is the most effective way to increase and maintain your vitamin D levels. Increasing the dose to 25mcg (1000IU) will do you no harm and may help you to achieve optimal rather than adequate levels. When choosing a supplement, you should opt for vitamin D3 as evidence suggests that this form is more effective at maintaining vitamin D status than vitamin D2.



Light therapy

If vitamin D really does impact on sex hormones and libido then another option to get your UV fix is light therapy. Scientists at the University of Siena in Italy found that regular, early-morning use of a light box (such as those used to treat SAD) helped men increase testosterone levels and improved their sex life.

There are many factors that can affect libido but if ensuring your vitamin D levels has a role to play then why not try topping up with supplements, diet or explore light therapy to see if this helps to reignite the lost spark in the bedroom during the winter months.