

# Choosing Wisely<sup>®</sup>

*An initiative of the ABIM Foundation*



**STRONGERTOGETHER**

## Vitamin D tests

When you need them—and when you don't

**M**any people don't have enough vitamin D in their bodies. Low vitamin D increases the risk of broken bones. It may also contribute to other health problems. That's why doctors often order a blood test to measure vitamin D.

But many people do not need the test. Here's why:

### **A test usually does not improve treatment.**

Many people have low levels of vitamin D, but few have seriously low levels. Most of us don't need a vitamin D test. We just need to make simple changes to get enough vitamin D. We need to get a little more sun and follow the other advice on the next page.



Even if you are at risk for other diseases, like Type 2 diabetes and heart disease, a vitamin D test isn't usually helpful. The test results are unlikely to change the advice from your doctor. It is much more important for you to make lifestyle changes first—to stop smoking, aim for a healthy weight, and be physically active. And, like most other Americans, you should try to get enough vitamin D from sun and foods. And talk to your doctor about whether a supplement is needed.

### **Extra tests lead to extra treatments and costs.**

Getting tests that you don't need often leads to treatments you don't need, or treatments that can even be harmful. For example, if you take too much vitamin D, it can damage your kidneys and other organs.

One blood test for vitamin D does not cost much. But doctors are ordering tests more often than ever, and the vitamin D test is now the fifth most popular lab test for older adults. All of these tests add up. In 2015, Medicare spent \$337 million on vitamin D tests for seniors, up from \$323 million the year before.

### **When should you have a vitamin D test?**

Talk to your doctor about your risks. If you have one of these conditions, you might need a vitamin D test:

- **Osteoporosis:** This disease makes your bones weak, so they are more likely to break.
- **A disease that damages your body's ability to use vitamin D:** These are usually serious and ongoing diseases of the digestive system, such as inflammatory bowel disease, celiac disease, kidney disease, liver disease, pancreatitis, and others.

If your doctor suggests getting a vitamin D test, ask about your risks. If your risk is high, you should get the test. If your risk is low, ask if you can avoid the test. Ask if you can boost your vitamin D with sunlight and food, and possibly supplements.

If your doctor does need to keep track of your vitamin D levels, make sure the same test is used each time. Ask your doctor which tests are best.

This report is for you to use when talking with your healthcare provider. It is not a substitute for medical advice and treatment. Use of this report is at your own risk.

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