

Sunbathing comes out from under a cloud

By Oliver Gillie

Johan Moan, a Norwegian cancer researcher, was very surprised when he found that **cancer patients diagnosed in summer live longer than those diagnosed in winter**. This vital clue convinced him that **vitamin D from summer sun is one of the best treatments a cancer patient can get** - and led him to question conventional wisdom on dangers of sunlight.

Dr Moan's finding has been confirmed in Britain and the United States and shown to be true of prostate, breast, colon and lung cancers. But most surprising of all it has also been found to be true of patients with melanoma - the dreaded skin cancer that cannot be cured once it has spread.

"These data argue that a good vitamin D status is advantageous in combination with standard cancer therapies," says Dr Moan. Cancer patients would be well advised to get their vitamin D checked and make sure it is at an optimum level.

It has been known for almost 100 years that **sunlight is vital for health** because it generates vitamin D in the skin. Sunlight and vitamin D were found to prevent and cure bone diseases and tuberculosis. There was a time in the 1920s and 1930s when whole hospitals were built in such a way that every ray of sunshine would be available for the benefit of patients. But much of this knowledge was forgotten over the years - and then the ozone hole was discovered. Worries about skin cancer spread round the globe, aided by money from international organisations such as WHO.

Cancer Research UK, backed by government and financed in part by suncream sales, told the public to put on factor 15 suncream 20 minutes before going outside in summer, to cover up with clothing and stay in the shade between 11am and 3pm. It was as if we were being told to protect ourselves against atomic fallout. Some ingenious people **even devised special full-body boiler suits for children to wear on the beach**. **Cancer Research UK has now modified its advice - slightly - but didn't bother to announce its change of heart and even denies that it ever told anyone to avoid the sun**.

However its mistaken advice has meant **that a generation has grown up deprived of health-giving sunshine - and diseases caused at least in part by insufficient vitamin D are becoming increasingly common**. Evidence now suggests that vitamin D may not only extend the lives of cancer patients but may also do something to **prevent the development of cancer and heart disease in the first place**. Insufficient sunshine in the early years also puts children at **risk of multiple sclerosis and diabetes** in later life. The cost of the mistaken advice in terms of human life and misery cannot be calculated.

Scientists at the International Agency for Research on Cancer, in Lyons, have estimated that taking a supplement of vitamin D can reduce the risk of death for older people by seven per cent over a six-year period. But more than **90 per cent of our vitamin D comes from the sun**. Food cannot provide more than a small part of what we need. In the past it has been said that casual exposure to the sun will provide enough vitamin D but this has no scientific basis. The majority of people in Britain have sub-optimal levels of vitamin D all year round, and in winter 90 per cent of people have low levels that make them vulnerable to infections such as flu.

Taking a vitamin D supplement (1,000 international units per day, available from Holland and Barrett or Boots) is a good idea, especially in winter, but the **easiest way for most people to get more of the vitamin is by sunbathing**. In northern Europe the sun is strong enough to make vitamin D only between the end of March and the end of September. And since warm sunny days are relatively rare in the British Isles **it is best to sunbathe whenever you get a chance, without suncream, exposing as much flesh as possible** for a time that will vary from a few minutes to more than an hour depending on time of day, time of year and your skin. Take care not to burn and your risk of skin cancer will be very small.

Johan Moan believes that the benefits of sun exposure by far exceed the risks of skin cancer. He estimates that an increase in sun exposure that might double the number of melanomas might save 10 times more people from dying of internal cancers, and would in addition extend the life of people with cancer, and reduce the risk of heart disease, diabetes and many other diseases. It's a no-brainer - **anyone can see that sunbathing makes sense - only make sure not to burn** and you will get very great benefits with a much reduced risk of skin cancer.