

High doses of vitamin D could cut relapse rate among MS sufferers

Melanie Reid, Oliver Gillie

Powerful new evidence about the ability of vitamin D to stem a wide range of diseases has brought the prospect of a nationwide programme to prescribe it in Scotland as a dietary supplement significantly closer.

Reports at the weekend suggested that experts were increasingly convinced that the so-called sunshine drug — whose significance was first revealed in detail by The Times last year — could make a difference to the country's appalling health record.

New research suggests that high doses of vitamin D could dramatically cut the relapse rate in people with multiple sclerosis. According to scientists in Canada, more than a third of sufferers taking high levels of supplementation did not fall ill during the period of the trial, representing a marked change in the pattern of their disease.

Like Scotland, Canada has a high rate of MS and there is growing evidence that this is connected to a cloudy climate that inhibits the natural uptake of vitamin D through the skin. Several studies have found vitamin D deficiency in people suffering from the disease.

Fears that not enough is known about the possible side effects of vitamin D supplements were countered by evidence presented at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Neurology.

Dr Jodie Burton, a neurologist at the University of Toronto, studied 25 people with relapsing-remitting multiple sclerosis. During the year of treatment 40 per cent of patients on the low dose of vitamin D (1,000 international units daily) experienced a relapse compared to only 16 per cent of those in the high dose (14,000 IU daily) group.

People taking the high dose of vitamin D suffered 41 per cent fewer relapses than the year before the study began, compared with 17 per cent of those taking typical doses.

Dr Burton found that those taking high doses of vitamin D did not suffer any significant side effects.

A recent online paper for the Journal of Neurology states that, from a medical point of view, vitamin D supplementation for MS patients "appears unavoidable".

Charles Pierrot-Deseilligny, a neurologist from Salpêtrière Hospital, Paris, says in the paper that vitamin D deficiency is "potentially the most promising" new clinical implication for MS.

He writes that most MS patients have low or insufficient levels of vitamin D compared to the international norm. "It can no longer be ignored that many MS patients have a lack of vitamin D which could be . . . corrected using an appropriate vitamin D supplementation."

Dr Pierrot-Deseilligny says that giving supplements to MS patients at all stages of the disease appears useful.

The best results in the Canadian study were observed only in those who took the high dose. People in that group were given escalating doses of the vitamin for six months, to a maximum of 40,000 IU daily. Doses were then gradually lowered over the next six months, averaging out to 14,000 IU daily for the year. Dr Burton advised MS patients to talk to their doctors before beginning vitamin D supplements, noting that too much of the vitamin can be harmful for people with certain medical conditions, including kidney disease.

Data was also presented in the Canadian study demonstrating that high dose vitamin D appears to suppress the auto-immune responses thought to cause MS. In patients given high doses, T-cell activity was shown to drop significantly. It is these T-cells that malfunction and attack the myelin sheaths that surround and protect nerve cells in both peripheral nerves and the brain.