



“I felt so weak but didn’t know why”

Kaye Fletcher-Brooke, 43, from Yorkshire, suffered from relentless fatigue and joint pains for many years before discovering that a simple vitamin deficiency was to blame...

The exact time I began to feel unwell is really hard to pinpoint now, but I do remember the beginnings of aches and pains in my knees, toes and neck following the birth of my first child in 2004. I just assumed they were my body’s response to broken nights and hectic days while trying to keep up with my hobby of running three times a week. I mentioned it to my GP, but he thought maybe it was a virus or I was just overdoing it and that it would go away on its own.

But it didn’t. And while my symptoms didn’t get any worse after the birth of my second child, they certainly became more noticeable with two children to look after.

As well as feeling washed out, I was experiencing persistent joint pains. I’d been running regularly for years, but now my knees began to throb terribly after each session. I didn’t take painkillers as it was more of a dull ache that wouldn’t stop, similar to toothache, rather than sharp pains, so I didn’t think

they would work. I tried warm baths and rubbing heat lotion into my knees, but it made no difference. My left big toe was also pounding, a constant nagging ache, particularly in the evenings. I used to sit on the settee and obsessively massage the toe, trying to ease the pain.

Like so many people, I put all of these symptoms down to a busy lifestyle. They weren’t debilitating but were always present and made everything I did much harder work.

But by the beginning of 2013, I felt completely exhausted. It was as if my batteries had run down. I’d fall asleep while singing my daughter

to sleep – mid-song. I took a vitamin and mineral energy-boosting supplement and began going to bed up to 90 minutes earlier than normal

– around 9.30 to 10pm every night, which was very unusual – but nothing made any difference.

In April that year, my husband, who is a photographer, was doing a photoshoot for Andrew Thomas, the founder and managing director of BetterYou, a dietary supplements

company. Andrew and I started talking about my symptoms and he suggested ordering one of their vitamin D home-testing kits.

I knew very little about vitamin D deficiency, other than it could cause rickets, and assumed it was an old-fashioned problem among children and sailors in the war. I didn’t even know it existed any more. Although I didn’t think I could be deficient, I thought it wouldn’t do any harm to have my levels checked.

The testing kit involved pricking my finger and putting four drops of blood on to a collection card. Then I sent the card off to a lab, which measured the vitamin D levels.

Less than a week later, the results were emailed back to me. I was very deficient, with vitamin D levels of just 27.1 nanomoles per litre (nmol/L). Experts believe that vitamin D levels above 50 nmol/L are ‘sufficient’ for most people, although for optimal health these levels should be 70 to 80 nmol/L.

I was flabbergasted. I had been taking a multivitamin tablet every day and ate a healthy diet, including plenty of eggs and oily fish, which are rich in vitamin D. I knew that most of the body’s vitamin D comes from sunlight. I was outside running

*Did you know?
People with a body mass index of 30 or greater often have low blood levels of vitamin D*

three times a week and walked the children to school every weekday. I certainly wasn't living like a hermit in the dark with the curtains closed.

I started using a supplement in the form of a once-daily spray containing 3,000 IU (75 mcg) of vitamin D. I also started doing more research into possible causes of vitamin D deficiency, as I couldn't think of any particular reason why my levels were so low. I discovered that sun creams can have a big impact on vitamin D absorption and realised that my daily moisturiser had a high factor, SPF 30. I've always used moisturiser with sunscreen – thinking that it could help to fight signs of ageing, but I understand now that I wasn't exposing my skin to the sun. Most of the time, the only parts of my body exposed without an SPF were my hands and wrists. If I compare skin to a solar panel that collects sunlight, I was like a solar panel with a cover on.

I started alternating between a moisturiser containing a high SPF and another one without. All my symptoms improved significantly within a couple of weeks of using the spray and alternating moisturisers. After six months of using the vitamin D supplement, in December 2013, I had my vitamin D levels retested and I was delighted to see that I was no longer deficient. My levels were up to 86.1 nmol/L, which is well within the normal range. I will probably do another test in a few months, to check my levels.

I no longer have aching joints, have much more energy and I sleep better too. I'm now more aware of how widespread vitamin D deficiency is. My children use the junior version

(400 IU (10mcg)) of the vitamin D spray. I also make sure they have regular sun exposure – in summer, for example, they don't always use a sunscreen first thing in the morning. Once they have absorbed some of the sunlight, I apply a high

SPF cream on them later. Although I have discussed vitamin D deficiency with friends and family to spread the word, most people don't take it seriously. And if I hadn't been tested and found to be deficient, I would probably react in the same way. ✨

the facts

Vitamin D deficiency

What does vitamin D do?

Vitamin D is needed for health and to maintain strong bones. It does so by helping the body absorb calcium (one of bones' building blocks) from food and supplements. Muscles need it to move, nerves need it to carry messages between the brain and body, and the immune system needs it to fight off invading bacteria and viruses.

depends on skin type), taking care not to burn. Vitamin D is found in some foods such as fortified fat spreads, oily fish, eggs and fortified breakfast cereals, but it's difficult to get enough from food alone.

What are the symptoms?

Bone, muscle and joint pain, fatigue and an increased sensitivity to pain. In severe cases, deficiency can lead to bone problems, such as rickets in children – known as osteomalacia in adults.

How common is vitamin D deficiency?

A survey in 2007 revealed that more than half of UK adults have insufficient levels of vitamin D and that 16 per cent have severe deficiency during winter and spring.

Do I need vitamin D supplements?

The Department of Health recommends a daily 400 IU (10 mcg) vitamin D supplement for anyone at risk, including people aged 65 and over, breastfed babies and children under five years, people who don't expose themselves to the sun and pregnant or breastfeeding women. If you are concerned that you are at risk or have symptoms, ask your GP for a blood test.

Where does vitamin D come from?

Most of your body's vitamin D is formed through sunlight on your skin, especially during summer. To ensure sufficient vitamin D levels, try to get ten minutes of sun exposure to bare skin without sunscreen, once or twice a day (but that