

By Dr Clare Bailey GP and parenting expert and Dr Michael Mosley, science journalist from BBC's The One Show

It's that time of year when, after the faintest glimmer of sun, many parents try not to leave the house without bottles of sun tan lotion, hats, UV impenetrable all-in-one outfits and prams which keep out all but occasional glints of sunlight and are firmly parked in the shade at all times. But can a bit of sunlight be a good thing?



Many of our generation were left in prams parked at the end of the garden or on the doorstep, regardless of the weather and were expected to play outside, all year round, developing the inevitable summer tan. Apart from the physical and life skills developed as 'free range kids' who learnt to overcome boredom, invent their own games, work things out for themselves and enjoy the rough & tumble of outdoor life, there may be more benefits from regular exposure to sunlight than has previously been recognised.

- Vitamin D, most of which is manufactured in our skin through the direct action of the sun, is important for the development of healthy bones, preventing rickets in kids. We now know that it does much, much more than that. Although it is called a vitamin, it is more like a hormone, helping regulate everything from brain development to the proper functioning of the immune system.
- Higher levels of Vitamin D in pregnancy and in early life are associated in later life with reduced chances of getting many cancers and with lower rates of conditions such as MS, diabetes, high blood pressure and schizophrenia, amongst others.
- Research has found that in winter and spring half of people in the UK have below recommended vitamin D levels. This is more marked in people who have darker skin where it takes up to six times more sun exposure to increase vitamin D levels.
- The current UK sunlight policy advice 'to cover up and keep in the shade' is based on an Australian model, where vitamin D levels are already over three times higher than in the UK and the risks of serious sunburn are significantly greater.
- In addition, sunscreen blocks the UVB rays which are the ones needed for vitamin D production.
- The evidence is not straightforward. For example melanoma is commoner in people who work indoors than people who work outdoors. An Australian office worker is more likely to get a melanoma than an Australian farmer. It is a condition associated with intermittent high exposure rather than prolonged exposure.



The trouble is that these days we don't get outside nearly enough and so for much of the year people who live in Northern climes are vitamin D deficient. There are now dozens of studies looking into the potential benefits of boosting blood levels.

The message is to get kids out in the sun regularly, throughout the year. Obviously avoid getting burnt when the sun is strong by wearing hats, T shirts and generous amounts of sun cream, but between October and March and if the shadow of the sun is longer than your height, then enjoy the sun.

So before you start scheduling a busy indoor-based activity and educational program for your kids this summer, or leaving them in front of their screens, do a quick 'indoor' verses 'outdoor-reared' check...a bit of sunshine might do them (and you) some good.

