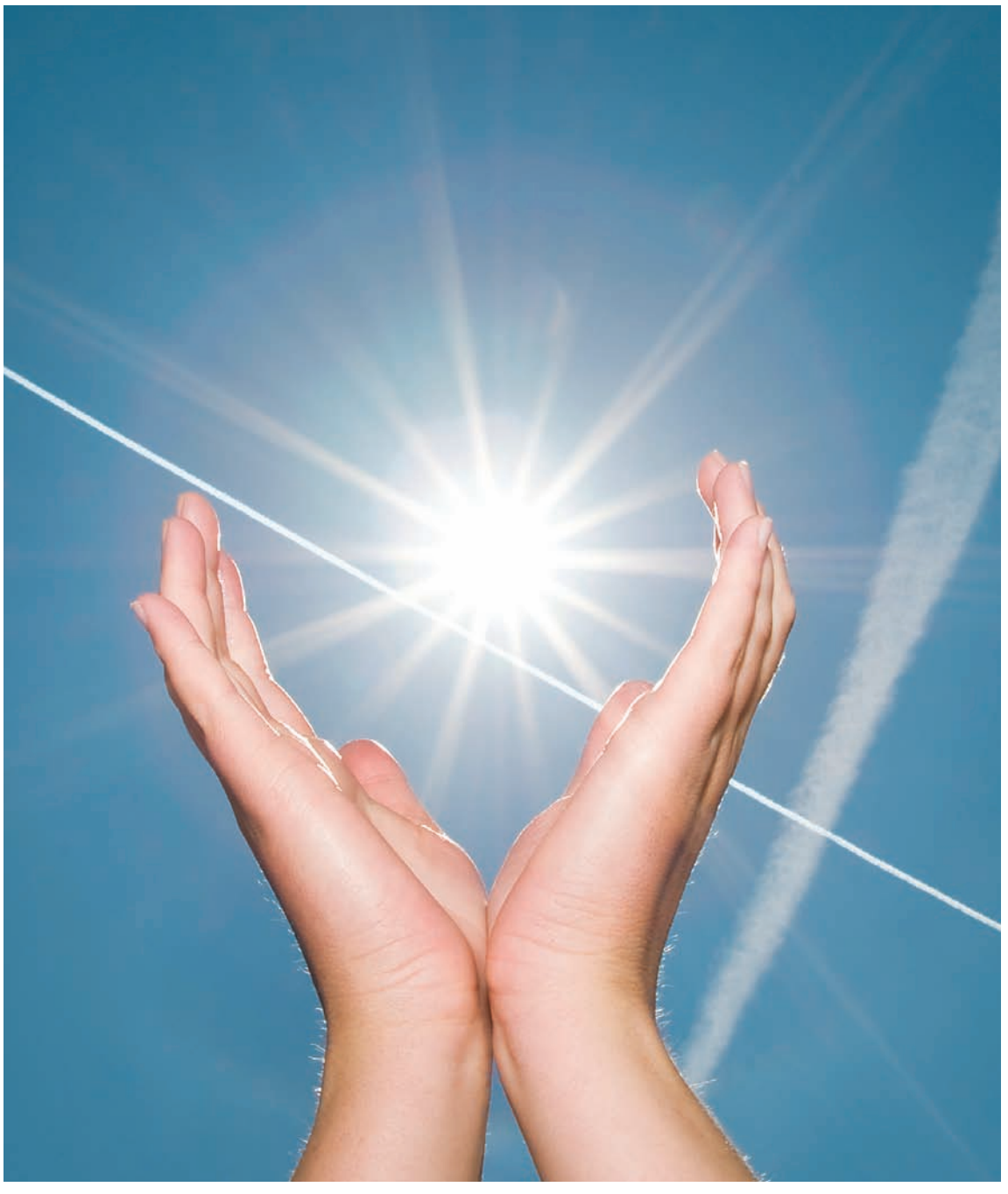
A Dose of D

The safer way to get the vitamin you need.

BY DR. MELISSA SCHWARZSCHILD



My patients give me lots of reasons for not wearing wear sunscreen, the most recent being "Doesn't sunscreen make you vitamin D deficient?" All I can think is, "Gee, thank you, Fox News!" Fair and balanced, maybe, but thorough and accurate? Not so much.

While it's true that vitamin D deficiency leads to rickets in children and osteoporosis in adults, we can all maintain adequate levels of vitamin D while protecting ourselves from the harmful effects of the sun. Vitamin D is important in the absorption of calcium and therefore helps to build strong bones in children and prevent osteoporosis in adults. Sources of vitamin D are twofold: dietary (including supplements) and sunlight.

The role of sunlight is to convert 7-dehydrocholesterol, a vitamin D precursor, to vitamin D3. This conversion takes place in the outermost layer of skin and happens only in the presence of sunlight.

Vitamin D acquired through dietary sources or vitamin supplements is already in the form of vitamin D3, bypassing the conversion step in the skin. However, dietary vitamin D is not well-absorbed from the intestines. So, as it turns out, it's much more efficient to acquire vitamin D from the sun.

Season, latitude and altitude affect levels of sunlight as well as the skin's ability to convert 7-dehydrocholesterol to vitamin D3. The conversion occurs most efficiently when the sun is at its strongest, during midday hours and in summer months. In fact, studies have shown that blood levels of vitamin D are much lower in winter months when sunlight isn't as strong. Because the sun is stronger at higher altitudes and near the equator, people living in these areas require less sunlight to make vitamin D.

Another factor influencing effective vitamin D conversion is skin color. Increased pigment in the skin inhibits the conversion. Because of this, darker-skinned people require about six times as much sunlight to make the necessary conversion. Interestingly, anthropologists believe that the reason lighter-skinned populations live in geographic areas far to the north of the equator is that over time, evolution required lighter skin types in those areas so that vitamin D could be more readily obtained from a weaker source of sunlight.

So, with all this fuss being made about the importance of sunlight, just how much sun do we really need to obtain adequate levels of vitamin D?

Only 10 to 15 minutes, two or three times a week. Most of us get this much sun walking through parking lots and to and from the car running errands, even before we spend an hour outside at a soccer game. And because vitamin D is fat-soluble, it can be stored in the body for several months, which helps us maintain adequate levels of vitamin D during the winter months, when the sun isn't as strong.

So don't abandon the sunscreen; the risk of exposing unprotected skin to the sun far outweighs the possibility of not getting enough vitamin D.

Dr. Schwarzschild is a board-certified dermatologist practicing with Richmond Dermatology Specialists and a fellow of the American Academy of Dermatology. Her special areas of interest include laser and dermatologic surgery and cosmetic dermatology.