

## Surprising Brain Booster

**S**ome people love to travel. But if you're someone who needs a good reason to pack your bags, here's one to consider: Your brain will love it if you hit the road!

**HERE'S WHY:** The brain's ability to grow, known as *plasticity*, never stops. When you take in new sights and information—walking unfamiliar streets, admiring the scenery and listening to (and speaking) unfamiliar languages—the brain forms new neurons and connections. It literally gets bigger and more vibrant, explains Paul Nussbaum, PhD, a clinical neuropsychologist in Wexford, Pennsylvania.

You may also get a boost in creativity. Research that looked at fashion executives found that those who had lived abroad created products that were consistently more creative than those produced by their stay-at-home peers.

Of course, not everyone has the time (or the cash or inclination) for exotic vacations. That's OK. Your brain will be just as happy when you enjoy a stimulating "staycation."

**THE TRICK:** Do *anything* that isn't routine. Go on weekend road trips. Visit that museum you've always been meaning to see. Take different routes to work. Introduce yourself to someone whom you've been tempted to talk to but never did.

But if you *can* travel, book those tickets soon. Even when the trip is over, you'll hopefully have photos to remind you of your adventures and memories to share with others. Remembering stimulates the same neurochemistry as the experience itself. Your brain wants to be stimulated, and reliving your travels is yet another great way to do it.

*Rebecca Shannockoua*



### >> A COMMON DEFICIENCY

Vitamin D is one of the most common nutrition deficiencies in the US. More than half of older adults are deficient—in part because the body's ability to synthesize vitamin D from sunlight declines with age. *Those with dark skin fare worst:* Research has found that 40% of Hispanics and a staggering 84% of African-Americans over age 50 were vitamin D deficient.

Only a few foods (such as salmon, sun-dried mushrooms, cod-liver oil and, to a much lesser extent, egg yolks) contain vitamin D, so most Americans rely on fortified foods (such as milk and some breakfast cereals). Taking a vitamin D supplement helps, but it doesn't take the place of sunshine. The vitamin D produced by sunshine enters the bloodstream slowly and maintains its health-promoting biological activity for at least twice as long as supplemental D.

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### DANGERS OF LOW VITAMIN D

Humans have evolved to depend on sunshine. So what happens when you never go outside without wearing sunscreen—or rarely go outside at all? When used properly, a sunscreen with an SPF of 30 reduces vitamin D production by 97%. *Important health risks now being linked to low vitamin D levels...*

• **Multiple sclerosis.** You're five times more likely to get this disease if you live in North America or Europe than in the tropics. In the US, prevalence of this disease in northern states such as Maine, Minnesota and Washington is nearly double that found in sunnier areas.

• **Cancer.** There isn't conclusive proof that people with low vitamin D have an increased risk for cancer. But there's persuasive evidence

from population and observational studies that people with sufficient vitamin D are 30% to 50% less likely to develop breast, colorectal or other cancers than those with vitamin D deficiencies.

• **Heart disease.** Vitamin D deficiency is associated with increased heart attack risk. People who live in sunny climates are also less likely to have high blood pressure.

Other health problems linked to vitamin D deficiency include osteoporosis, diabetes and depression.

### THE REAL CANCER RISK

Dermatologists have long used the "C" word to warn people about the sun. It's true that *chronic* sun exposure increases one's risk for basal and squamous cell carcinomas.

While these "nonmelanoma" skin cancers are a significant health problem, they're fortunately among the easiest to cure and are rarely fatal. Meanwhile, the noncancer health risks from low vitamin D, such as those described earlier, generally outweigh the risks from these cancers.

Melanoma is another story. A frequently fatal cancer that results in some 10,000 deaths in the US each year, melanoma is strongly linked to *sunburns*. People who get only short-term and occasional sun exposure don't face the same risk. In addition, melanoma often develops on parts of the body with little (or no) sun exposure, such as the buttocks.

### A SENSIBLE COMPROMISE

*Let me be clear:* I do not recommend sunbathing or tanning. I advise most adults to get *just enough* sun (without sunscreen) to help produce a vitamin D blood level of at least 30 ng/mL, as measured by a 25-hydroxy vitamin D blood test. The rest of the time, you should use sunscreen and wear a hat and other protective clothing. *My approach...*

• **Follow the "no sunburn" rule.** The amount of vitamin D produced by your body depends on such factors as the season, time of day, your geographic location and your pigmentation. I advise my patients