

About Vitamin A and Vitamin A Deficiency

What does vitamin A do?

Vitamin A is a fat-soluble vitamin that is important for the health of your eyes, your immune system, skin, lungs, digestive and urinary systems. It is also important in wound healing and cell reproduction.

What happens if my vitamin A is low/if I don't get enough vitamin A?

Changes in vision are often the first noticeable sign of vitamin A deficiency. You may notice that you cannot see as well as night (for example it may be harder to drive at night, you may not be able to easily find your way to the bathroom, or you may notice that you need to turn on lights earlier in the evening), you may also find that your eyes are dry and irritate easily. Additional early signs of vitamin A deficiency are dry hair, dry mouth, dry/itchy/bumpy skin, broken nails, and more frequent infections.

If vitamin A deficiency is severe or is allowed to progress, serious problems can develop. The most serious problem is permanent blindness.

What are other symptoms?

Some other symptoms of vitamin A deficiency include:

- Loss of tears
- Sores in the eyes
- Fatigue
- Dry cracked lips, mouth sores
- Diarrhea
- Bladder infections
- Vaginal infections
- Upper/lower respiratory infections
- Poor and delayed wound healing

Where can I get vitamin A?

There are two kinds of vitamin A: the kind in plants which is beta-carotene and the kind in animals which is retinol or “pre-formed” vitamin A. Retinol is found in foods that come from animals such as whole eggs, milk, and liver. It is also found in fortified cereals and margarine. Beta-carotene is found in red, orange and green vegetables and some fruits such as carrots, cantaloupes, apricots, mangoes, sweet potatoes, red peppers, tomatoes, peas and spinach. Vitamin A is also found as a dietary supplement in multivitamins and in capsules or tablets. As a supplement, you can find both beta-carotene and retinol. If you have vitamin A deficiency, your doctor will probably ask you to take supplemental vitamin A and watch your dietary intake. Most of the time if you are deficient, your doctor will ask you to take retinol instead of beta-carotene.

Other important things

If you are pregnant, it is important to talk to your doctor about how much vitamin A is safe to take. Retinol at levels above 10,000 IU can be a problem in pregnancy. There is no safety issue with beta-carotene in pregnancy. It is also important that you follow up with your doctor for lab tests and other recommended care.