

# THE INSIDE STORY<sup>®</sup>

MARCH 2011 | GREENSHIELD.CA



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## Using vitamin D as your excuse to go south this winter?

### New report may have just blown your cover...

Relying on scientific evidence should be your guiding principle for assessing what will help maximize plan member health. However, science is always evolving—and these days, it can often seem like it is evolving at the speed of light. Keeping up can be a challenge. A good example is vitamin D and calcium intake—just how much is the right level? This has been a debate in the spotlight for some time now. And, now to add to the debate, the recommendations are in from the latest and greatest scientific report.

# The Report...

Although vitamin D and calcium have long been known to play an important part in bone health, the public has heard a range of messages over the last ten years. A variety of messages have related not just to vitamin D and calcium and bone health, but also the potential role of vitamin D in helping to prevent other health issues.

To help clarify the issue, the Canadian and U.S. governments jointly asked the US Institute of Medicine (IOM) to conduct a review of the body of science evidence to date and develop the resulting report: *Dietary Reference Intakes for Calcium and Vitamin D*. The report was sponsored by the U.S. Department of Health and



Human Services, U.S. Department of Agriculture, U.S. Department of Defense, and Health Canada.

The report is especially timely because it allowed Health Canada's healthy intake recommendations for vitamin D to catch up with the latest scientific evidence. The most recent healthy intake recommendations, known as "Dietary Reference

Intakes" or DRIs, were developed in 2007. Fast forward to 2010 and now there is a lot more research and higher quality scientific information available.



# The Recommendations...

Released in November 2010, the IOM report indicates that scientific evidence supports a role for vitamin D and calcium in bone health—but not its role in other health conditions like cancer, cardiovascular disease, and autoimmune diseases. This contradicts messages over the last several years that associate a variety of health issues with too little vitamin D circulating in the blood.

In addition, the IOM report goes on to state that emerging evidence indicates that too much vitamin D and calcium may in fact be harmful, which directly contradicts a main message that seems to have gained public attention that where vitamin D and calcium are concerned, "more is better." In fact, the

report indicates that getting too much calcium from dietary supplements has been associated with kidney stones, while too much vitamin D can damage the kidneys and heart, or worse, in extreme levels it can even be deadly.

Based on the IOM report, Health Canada has updated the specific intake recommendations, making them available to



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# The debate continues...

Confusion about the amount of vitamin D necessary to ward off deficiency has arisen in recent years as tests that measure levels in patients' blood have become widely used. The measurements of sufficiency and deficiency — the cutpoints — that clinical laboratories use to report test results have not been based on rigorous scientific studies and are not standardized. This lack of agreement means the same individual could be declared deficient or sufficient depending on which laboratory reads the test. There may be an overestimation of the number of people with vitamin D deficiency because many labs appear to be using cutpoints that are higher than the evidence indicates are appropriate.<sup>1</sup>

the public at <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/nutrition/vitamin/vita-d-eng.php#t1>. Health Canada is also clearly reinforcing some of the IOM report's main messages that "there is no additional health benefit associated with vitamin D intakes above the level

of the new Recommended Dietary Allowance (RDA)" and that "total vitamin D intake should remain below the level of the new Tolerable Upper Intake Level (UL) to avoid possible adverse effects."<sup>2</sup>

## New Dietary Reference Intakes (DRIs)...

### Vitamin D:

Age group	Recommended Dietary Allowance per day
Infants 0-6 months	400 IU (10 mcg) *
Infants 7-12 months	400 IU (10 mcg) *
Children 1-3 years	600 IU (15 mcg)
Children 4-8 years	600 IU (15 mcg)
Children and Adults 9-70 years	600 IU (15 mcg)
Adults > 70 years	800 IU (20 mcg)
Pregnancy & Lactation	600 IU (15 mcg)

### Calcium:

Age group	Recommended Dietary Allowance per day
Infants 0-6 months	200 mg *
Infants 7-12 months	260 mg *
Children 1-3 years	700 mg
Children 4-8 years	1000 mg
Children 9-18 years	1300 mg
Adults 19-50 years	1000 mg
Adults 51-70 years	
Men	1000 mg
Women	1200 mg
Adults > 70 years	1200 mg
Pregnancy & Lactation	
14-18 years	1300 mg
19-50 years	1000 mg

\*Adequate Intake rather than Recommended Dietary Allowance.

## Health Canada states...

The recommended amount of vitamin D per day has increased for everyone. But this does not mean that Canadians need to change their current food or supplement intakes. Based on Health Canada's preliminary analysis of Canadians' vitamin D blood levels, most are currently meeting their needs for vitamin D.<sup>2</sup>



## Remember: Vitamin D = NHP

Vitamin D is a Natural Health Product (NHP), not a drug, so it is not eligible for coverage unless your benefit plan contract specifically indicates otherwise.



## Is the story over? The verdict is still out on the connection between low vitamin D and the risk of other health issues.

Although the IOM report indicates that the scientific

evidence isn't compelling enough to recommend taking vitamin D to ward off cancer, heart disease, diabetes and other chronic issues, many public health organizations like the Canadian Cancer Society,

the Canadian Paediatrics Society and Osteoporosis Canada are sticking with their positions that vitamin D has a preventive role. For instance, the Canadian Cancer Society states, "The institute's levels are targeting only bone health. We're going to continue with our recommendation around cancer prevention."<sup>3</sup>

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It would appear that where low vitamin D intake and its impact on other health issues is concerned, public health groups have agreed to disagree for now, however, the diverging opinions suggest that the long-running scientific debate over the

optimum dose of vitamin D is likely to continue. And, it is likely to continue until there is definitive scientific evidence that either substantiates or rejects the claims that connect low vitamin D intake with other health issues.

## Let the scientific facts speak for themselves... But listen to them as they evolve.

### What does this mean for you as a plan sponsor?

The vitamin D debate reminds us that science is always evolving. As summed up by the IOM Committee Chair, "Past cases such as hormone replacement therapy and high doses of beta carotene remind us that some therapies that seemed to show promise for treating or preventing health problems ultimately did not work out and even caused harm. This is why it is appropriate to approach emerging evidence about an intervention cautiously, but with

an open mind." It also reminds us to call on the experts for help because the pace of scientific discovery today makes keeping up a challenge—one that you can rely on your plan advisor to help you with.



### What does this mean for you as a Canadian in the depths of winter trying desperately to justify jetting off to a warmer climate to escape the sub-zero temperatures?

You may be out of luck. The bottom line with the IOM report is that although Health Canada has updated the recommended levels, in terms of bone health, the majority of Canadians and Americans are getting enough vitamin D. The IOM committee states that, "some adolescent girls may not get quite enough calcium, and there is a greater chance that elderly individuals may fall short of the necessary amounts of calcium and vitamin D. These individuals should increase their intake of foods containing these nutrients and

possibly take a supplement." <sup>3</sup> In any case, it's important to double-check your intake levels because it's important to make sure you are getting enough – but equally important to check that you are not getting too much. So much for justifying squeezing in a quick getaway to soak up the sun. Ski holiday anyone?



## Time to check in on vitamin D...

Vitamin D is a nutrient that helps the body use calcium and phosphorus to build and maintain strong bones and teeth. It's important to get the right level, but not take too much:

- *Too little vitamin D:* can cause calcium and phosphorus levels in the blood to decrease so calcium is pulled out of the bones for use in maintaining stable blood levels. The result? Everything from rickets in children and osteoporosis (fragile bones) in adults and osteomalacia (softening of the bones) in adults.

- *Too much vitamin D:* can cause too much calcium deposited in the body leading to calcification of the kidney, heart, lungs and blood vessels.

Check out what level is just right for you at the Health Canada website at <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/nutrition/vitamin/vita-d-eng.php>

Sources:

<sup>1</sup> *IOM Report Sets New Dietary Intake Levels for Calcium and Vitamin D to Maintain Health and Avoid Risks Associated with Excess*, Office of News and Public Information, November 30, 2010 <http://www8.nationalacademies.org/onpinews/newsitem.aspx?RecordID=13050>

<sup>2</sup> *Vitamin D and Calcium: Updated Dietary Reference Intakes*, Health Canada website: <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/nutrition/vitamin/vita-d-eng.php>

<sup>3</sup> *Public health groups sticking to higher vitamin D recommendation*, Martin Mittelstaedt, Globe and Mail, Thursday, November 30, 2010 <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/health/public-health-groups-sticking-to-higher-vitamin-d-recommendation/article1819676/>

# Ontario says no more funding for vitamin D testing

As of December 1, 2010, the province of Ontario delisted vitamin D testing except for a small number of conditions such as rickets, osteoporosis, and kidney disease. The decision was made on the basis that the tests are not necessary for most people.

Vitamin D testing, which costs about \$50 each and analyzes blood for the amount of vitamin D it contains, had become one of the most frequently

ordered medical tests. The Ministry of Health estimated that if current trends continued, vitamin D tests could cost the province about \$150 million annually by 2012.

Some provinces already have similar restrictions, while others are currently reviewing Ontario's guidelines so we may see them following in Ontario's footsteps.



## Time to give provincial drug reform a check up Here's where we are today...

There's no doubt, drug reform was the story of 2010 as the provincial governments aimed to decrease generic costs to promote savings and invest in health care delivery. Now as 2011 unfolds, it's time to check in on the various drug reform timelines to see where things are at...



### ONTARIO

## Next round of generic price and professional allowance reductions

In April 2010, the government of Ontario announced their comprehensive drug system reform initiative, including lowering the cost of generic drugs for both public and private plans and eliminating professional allowances to make Ontario's drug system more

accountable. The first round of generic drug price reductions came into effect July 2010. The next round of price reductions—for private sector—is scheduled for April 1, 2011. Here's a refresher of what's to come:

<b>Now</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Generics listed at 50% of brand price</li> <li>■ Professional allowances at 50% of generic price</li> </ul>
<b>April 1, 2011</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Generics reduced to 35% of brand price</li> <li>■ Professional allowances reduced to 35% of generic price</li> </ul>
<b>April 1, 2012</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Generics scheduled to be further reduced to 25% of brand price</li> <li>■ Professional allowances reduced to 25% of generic price</li> </ul>

For the public plan, Ontario Drug Benefit (ODB), generics are listed at 25% of brand price (reduced July 2010) and professional allowances are eliminated.

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## QUEBEC

### Nothing official yet but here's the word on the street

Although not yet officially announced by the province of Quebec, generic manufacturers report that generic drug pricing reductions and professional allowance reductions are phasing in:

<b>Now</b>	■ Generics listed at 37.5% of brand price ■ Professional allowances at 20% of generic price
<b>April 1, 2011</b>	■ Generics reduced to 30% of brand price ■ Professional allowances reduced to 16.5% of generic price
<b>April 1, 2012</b>	■ Generics scheduled to be further reduced to 25% of brand price ■ Professional allowances scheduled to be further reduced to 15.5% of generic price

## ALBERTA

### Transitional allowances phased in over three years

To offset any revenue loss due to lower cost generics, the Alberta government phased in a Transitional Allowance for pharmacies for three years:

<b>Now</b>	■ Transitional Allowance of \$3 per prescription that costs less than \$75.00
<b>April 1, 2011- March 31, 2012</b>	■ Transitional Allowance reduced to \$2 per prescription that costs less than \$75.00
<b>April 1, 2012- March 31, 2013</b>	■ Transitional Allowance scheduled to be further reduced to \$1 per prescription that costs less than \$75.00
<b>After March 31, 2013</b>	■ Transitional Allowance ends

### Savings forecast? The potential impact is still unknown

Although there should be some overall savings for plan sponsors, the potential impact cannot be determined across the board because it depends on a range of variables like:

- current mix of generic and brand name drugs
- stakeholder reaction in the provincial marketplaces
- future market forces potentially affecting drug prices and plan costs in unexpected ways, such as the increasing utilization of biologics



# Community Giving Program



## Here's how we add to the greater good...

Creating a brighter future for those most in need is what we do. Through our Green Shield Canada Community Giving Program, we make a difference by providing critical funding that community-based not-for-profit organizations need to achieve significant, concrete results.

### Spotlight on...

## Windsor Essex County Food Bank Association

High rates of unemployment persist in several Canadian cities creating profound economic and social difficulties for many. To help, we allocated funds from our Community Giving Program late in 2010 to numerous food banks across Canada. This initiative was part of our effort to support organizations that are meeting the needs of Canadians for basic services like food and shelter.

Our food bank donations were especially timely because donations to local food banks typically drop off significantly shortly after the holiday season. For instance, the funds we provided to the Windsor Essex County Food Bank Association will help carry the food bank's inventory well into March 2011, providing food for the over 160,000 clients and children the association assists.

*"On behalf of the Windsor Essex County Food Bank Association, I would like to take this opportunity to extend our thanks to Green Shield Canada for this much appreciated, generous donation. Green Shield has always been very supportive and generous in our communities and especially with helping the less fortunate."*

**June Muir, Windsor Essex County Food Bank Association**

## Giving back by fighting hunger and feeding hope throughout the communities we serve...

### Yukon

- Food Bank Society of Whitehorse

### British Columbia

- Abbotsford Food Bank
- Greater Vancouver Food Bank Society

### Alberta

- Calgary Inter-Faith Food Bank
- Edmonton's Food Bank

### Ontario

- Daily Bread Food Bank (Toronto)
- Mississauga Food Bank
- Barrie Food Bank
- London and Area Food Bank

### Food Bank of Waterloo Region

- Hamilton Food Share
- Sudbury Food Bank

### Quebec

- Moisson Maurice / Centre du Quebec (Trois Rivieres)
- Moisson Montreal
- Moisson Estrie (Sherbrooke)

### New Brunswick

- New Brunswick Association of Food Banks (Grand Falls)

### Prince Edward Island

- PEI Association of Food Banks

### Newfoundland

- Community Food Sharing Association of Newfoundland & Labrador

## We empower charitable initiatives...

In the words of Tim Catherwood, Green Shield Canada Vice President of Human Resources, "As Canada's only national not-for-profit health and dental benefits specialist, Green Shield Canada's mission is focused on enhancing the greater good. This recent initiative to support food banks that provide services directly to people in need, is an example of our mission in action – an example of how as an organization, and through the Green Shield Canada Community Giving Program, we support charitable efforts across the country." Helping those in need today should lead to a better tomorrow for all of us.

*"The Food Bank of Waterloo Region extends gratitude for sharing with their community. Green Shield Canada's donation will make an immediate impact, providing food and giving hope to those in the Waterloo Region."*

*"The Barrie Food Bank recognizes Green Shield Canada's generosity as a wonderful boost to the Food Bank's efforts of assisting vulnerable families in the Barrie community."*

Interested in learning more? Please contact us at [communitygiving@greenshield.ca](mailto:communitygiving@greenshield.ca)

# NEWS & EVENTS

## Out and About – Events you won't want to miss

Why not attend one of these upcoming industry events? You'll be glad you did – they are always packed with the latest and greatest industry news, interesting opinions from industry leaders, and loads of innovative ideas.

March 9th, 4:00 p.m.

### Green Shield Canada Benefit Forum – "Say YES to drugs"

- The Estates of Sunnybrook, Toronto, Ontario
- Contact your Account Executive for more details

May 18th - 20th

### CPBI Forum 2011 – The Next Wave

- Sheraton Wall Centre Hotel, Vancouver, British Columbia
- Visit <http://www.cpbiicra.ca/en/page.ch2?uid=FORUM2011> for more details

## Winner of the draw for a 'night out on the town'



Congratulations to **Virgilio Balisican**, of Calgary, AB, the winner of Green Shield Canada's monthly draw for gift certificates for a 'night out on the town'. Through this contest, one name will be drawn each month from plan members who have registered for Plan Member Online Services for that month. To learn more, visit [greenshield.ca](http://greenshield.ca).

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