



Vasculitis: Food Facts and Fallacies

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When coping with the effects of a long-term condition like vasculitis it can be very tempting to try to find solutions from alternative remedies or specific foods. This fact sheet looks at the research evidence behind foods and nutrients which have been highlighted as having health benefits.

Vitamin D and Calcium

Should I take a vitamin D supplement?

Research studies, mainly with animals rather than people, suggest that vitamin D may reduce the risk of developing a number of autoimmune and chronic diseases. These studies also suggest that vitamin D may influence how diseases develop. All major recent studies found that the same amount of vitamin D and calcium is needed to keep bones healthy. However, more large people-based studies are needed to check if vitamin D can help to prevent or treat vasculitis and how much vitamin D should be taken.

Vitamin D also helps your body to absorb calcium. Although it is found in a small number of foods such as oily fish, eggs, fortified margarine and spreads and fortified breakfast cereals, most vitamin D is made in the skin with help from sunlight. If you have been advised to keep covered up in sunlight or wear total sun block, ask your doctor if a vitamin D supplement is right for you.

How much calcium should I have?

Try to have 3-4 servings of the following foods each day as these are the best sources of calcium: 200mls/¹/₃pint milk, small carton of yoghurt, 30g/1oz of hard cheese. If you don't eat dairy foods look out for calcium-enriched soya versions or try alternative non-dairy sources such as salmon, sardines, cabbage, beans and some nuts.

If your consultant has advised that your vasculitis is affecting your kidneys then you may need more detailed advice from a dietitian who specialises in kidney (renal) problems. Your consultant can refer you.

Complementary Medicines

Is it safe to try herbal medicines and multivitamin supplements?

People often look for complementary medicines such as multivitamin supplements and herbal medicines in an effort to get back to health. There is sometimes a belief that "*more is better*" and taking large doses of vitamins and minerals will be helpful.

In fact, large doses can be harmful. Research studies show that vitamin A, C, E, B₆ and minerals selenium and zinc may be toxic in large doses.

If you can eat a healthy balanced diet this should provide all the vitamins and minerals that you need. If you are finding eating a full diet difficult ask your doctor to refer you to a dietitian.

There is no clear evidence that herbal medicines will help if you suffer from vasculitis. However, some complementary medicines may interfere with how your prescribed medicines work. If you choose to try any, discuss with your pharmacist or doctor to ensure they are safe to take.

I've heard that zinc helps with healing. Should I be taking a zinc supplement?

Zinc is a mineral and you only need very small amounts of it for good health. It has several important functions including helping to:

- make new cells
- help wounds to heal
- process carbohydrate, fat and protein in food.

Zinc is very important for a healthy immune system. A recent large study advises that people with chronic autoimmune diseases should have their blood levels assessed and be given zinc supplements if zinc levels were low. Discuss this with your doctor.

Good food sources of zinc include meat, shellfish, milk, cheese, bread and wheatgerm (found in cereals). You should be able to get all the zinc you need by including these foods in your meal choices.

If you take zinc supplements, it is important not to take too much because they could be harmful. High doses of zinc reduce the amount of copper the body can absorb. This can lead to anaemia and weakening of bone, so it's best not to take zinc supplements, unless advised to by a doctor.

Probiotics

What are probiotics? Will they help my symptoms?

Probiotics are 'friendly bacteria' shown to have health benefits. They are found in some yoghurt, aged cheeses like Cheddar and blue cheese, and buttermilk. There is evidence to show that probiotics can be used safely in healthy individuals. They can also help to manage diarrhoea. What is not clear is the way in which probiotics work on the gut, or how they should be taken. For at risk groups including people with autoimmune diseases, no major studies show that probiotics are effective in controlling symptoms or in slowing how the disease progresses. If you are on immunosuppressant drugs you should discuss with your doctor whether probiotics are appropriate for you.

Omega-3 fats

Do omega-3 fats help if you have an autoimmune disease?

There is currently considerable interest in how omega-3 fats may help people who have autoimmune diseases. Omega-3 fats, found in fish and fish oils, are well recognised for the part they play in prevention and treatment of heart disease. As yet, there are no specific recommendations for autoimmune diseases on how much fish should be eaten or whether fish oil supplements might help.

Until further research is done the best advice is to make sure that you eat the current recommended amounts of 2 portions of fish each week. One of these portions should be oily fish, as these are the best source of omega-3 fats.

- Choose herring, sardines, mackerel, trout, fresh tuna or salmon.
- Count one portion as a small can of oily fish or a small fillet of fresh fish.
- Although fresh tuna is an oily fish, canned tuna does not count as oily fish, as the canning process reduces the amount of omega-3 fatty acids to levels similar to those in other fish.
- White fish like haddock, whiting and cod are also sources of omega-3 but much less than oily fish.

- The main shellfish sources of omega-3 are mussels, oysters, squid and crab.

Recommendations for the maximum number of portions of oily fish we should be eating each week are found on the NHS Choices website <http://www.nhs.uk/livewell/goodfood/pages/fish-shellfish.aspx>

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This information was produced for Nutrition and Diet Resources UK (NDR-UK) with the kind support of dietitians and related health and care professionals. At the time of publication the information contained within the resource was, to the best of our knowledge, correct and up-to-date. Always consult a suitably qualified dietitian and/or your GP on health problems. NDR-UK cannot be held responsible for how clients/patients interpret and use the information within this resource. Visit www.ndr-uk.org for more information and to contact the team on the development and evidence supporting this resource.

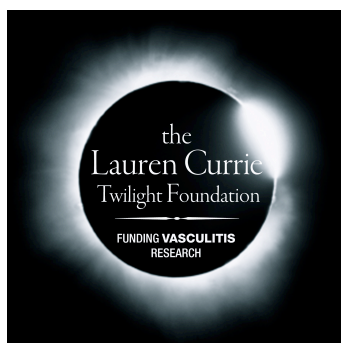


© NDR-UK Ref: 1009, First published: 08/13

Next review: 08/16

NDR-UK – the UK’s practitioner-led nutrition and diet resource provider.
Registered charity number SC041043, company number SC364677.

Funded By:



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