

Topless at the dinner table: a revolutionary proposal for healthy living

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The perfect meal, or at least the most complete, must take place in the open air on a sunny summer day. Such meals are more complete than any indoor meal can ever be because there is the opportunity to obtain vitamin D from sunlight.

Vitamin D can of course be obtained from oily fish and a few other foods such as butter, eggs and liver, but even in Britain with our poor weather we obtain 90 per cent of our vitamin D from sunlight. Only the Inuit, who eat oily fish or marine foods three times a day, get most of their vitamin D from food. For us, sunlight is an essential ingredient of the healthy diet.

Red wine, garlic and legumes have all been given credit as the crucial health-giving ingredient of the Mediterranean diet. But research to identify a particular healthy factor has not found definitive answers. It may be that the sun itself accounts for the health of people living an outdoor life in the Mediterranean.

Vitamin D is well known for its importance for healthy growth of bones – but in recent years its role in preventing some 25 different chronic diseases has been recognised. Vitamin D interacts with 30 or more body tissues and organs, regulating levels of calcium and switching genes on and off. The risk of some 12 different types of cancer is reduced by vitamin D. It reduces the risk of multiple sclerosis, diabetes, raised blood pressure, heart disease, inflammatory bowel diseases, polycystic ovary disease, menstrual problems, back pain, infertility, infections and dental decay.

It is an incredible list of diseases. Incredible that a woman who has been having difficulty getting pregnant may find no difficulty after a good summer holiday and some sunbathing. Or that someone who has been taking medication for high blood pressure may find that sunbathing is just as effective at controlling the condition.

Before vitamin D was added to margarine, rickets was a relatively common disease in northern European cities where poor people in particular had little opportunity to see the sun. But only small amounts are added to margarine – just enough to prevent rickets in most people and not enough to prevent all the other chronic diseases in which vitamin D is a factor. It is now recognised that officially recommended levels of vitamin D are far too low. It is advisable to take at least 1000 iu (international units) a day but higher levels are being recommended by some experts.

Those who believe that it should be possible to remain healthy simply by eating the right food must pause and consider whether their life really is natural. How much time do you spend outside in the middle of the day? Most of us live artificial lives indoors with little opportunity to obtain sunlight on skin. Only during the summer months, April to September, is the sun strong enough to bring about the synthesis of vitamin D in the skin. To build up sufficient reserves to carry you through the winter, it is necessary to sunbathe during the summer months.

Sunbathe! What about all the warnings to wear sunblock and avoid sunlight?

Unfortunately, these warnings are not based on an up-to-date assessment of scientific evidence. They have failed to take into account the benefits of sunlight and balance these against a rather small risk of skin cancer. It is important to sunbathe for at least a few minutes each day (if possible) without using any suncream, but take care not to bake or burn. Suncream blocks the UV rays which are essential for making vitamin D in the skin – and it may not do anything to prevent skin cancer.

But what of the etiquette of the perfect meal, *dejeuner sur l'herbe* – let us use the French term as we do for so much good food. It will be simplest if it is informal. The table must of course be in the shade because no one wants to be trapped in the sun.

Ladies should wear clothing that reveals the shoulders and knees. Gentlemen could, with permission of the hostess, be topless – or, if fashion allows, wear an athletic-looking vest that exposes shoulders. Trousers with zip-off bottoms are also helpful.

The perfect meal can then begin with refreshing drinks in a place offering a mixture of sun and shade. Everyone may arrange themselves so that the sun strikes first on one side and then the other. After 10 to 20 minutes in the sun without suncream (this could be too much for people with fair skin), the hosts may call the company to the table to stock up on all the other essential nutrients. At this point men may be permitted, or asked, to resume wearing their shirts.