

Why we need more vitamin B12 as we age

by *Kaylen Pfisterer, BSc, RIA Research Associate and the Assistant Research Coordinator*

Every cell in our body needs vitamin B12 to grow properly. Over time, not having enough B12 can increase the risk of:

- memory problems
- heart disease
- extra-large, unhealthy blood cells
- loss of feeling in the hands or feet.

As a result, vitamin B12 deficiency can impact the quality of life of older adults. The best way to find out if you are low in B12 is to have a blood test. It is important to ensure that it is treated before permanent damage occurs.

Where do we get our vitamin B12 from?

We get B12 from eating meats, eggs, and dairy products. Health Canada recommends that anyone over the age of 14 get 2.4 micrograms per day—a tiny but important amount. Studies show that older adults are generally eating enough B12, yet about 1 in 4 have a vitamin B12 deficiency.

This could be because as we age, our bodies are less able to take up the vitamin B12 we eat. That is especially true when certain medications are taken, such as antacids. More research is needed on how the need for vitamin B12 changes with age.

How can we make sure we are getting enough B12?

The good news: it is generally thought that you can't eat too much vitamin B12. It is safe to eat much more than the recommended daily allowance. Some studies show that foods fortified with B12 are more likely to result in adequate intake. Some examples of vitamin B12-fortified foods are cold breakfast cereals, soy milk, or other non-dairy milks. Check the side of the box or carton to see how much vitamin B12 is in a serving.



If you're concerned that you might not be getting enough vitamin B12, ask your doctor for a blood test to check your B12 level.

Vitamin B12 supplements are fairly cheap and widely available in drug stores. They come in many different doses. Your doctor or pharmacist can help you decide on the right dose for you.

About the Author:

Kaylen Pfisterer, BSc (Biomedical Science) is an RIA Research Associate and the Assistant Research Coordinator at the Schlegel-UW Research Institute for Aging*. Kaylen has vitamin B12 deficiency which prompted her ongoing Masters work in Kinesiology at the University of Waterloo where she is working with Professor Heather Keller (Schlegel Research Chair in Nutrition and Aging) and Dr. George Heckman (Schlegel Research Chair in Geriatric Medicine) to investigate vitamin B12 status and its impact on overall health in older adults living in long-term care.

*The Schlegel-UW Research Institute for Aging (RIA) is a not-for-profit organization whose aim is to enhance the quality of life and care of older adults through partnerships in research, education and practice. For more information go to: www.the-ria.ca