

VITAMIN D

UpDates

Vol. 5 - N. 4 - 2022

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Editorial

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(and little known)
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Circulating vitamin D₃
levels and risk
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is there a connection?

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EDITORIAL

Maurizio Rossini

*Department of Medicine,
Rheumatology Section, University of Verona*

VITAMIN D
UpDates

2022;5(4):134-135

Dear Colleagues,

In this issue we look at several aspects linked to the possible role of vitamin D in gastroenterology, with the usual contributions of experts. The question of a potential interaction between vitamin D and intestinal microbiota is complex and still for the most part uncertain – and therefore fascinating – especially in cases of qualitative and quantitative alterations of the latter. In the context of the physiology of the intestinal absorption of vitamin D, we must recall that any anatomical or functional alteration impacting the digestive tract can have an effect on microbiota and vitamin D status. On the other hand, given vitamin D's recognised immunomodulatory role, we cannot exclude that the role attributed to microbiota in the pathogenesis of many inflammatory bowel diseases (IBDs) is at least in part caused by a changed local availability of vitamin D.

As we shall see, many studies have assessed the effects of vitamin D on intestinal microbiota, in particular – though not exclusively – in connection with IBDs: in this case, an association between vitamin D deficiency and disease activity, risk of relapse and failure of therapy has been documented.

At the same time, significant effects of microbiota on vitamin D have been predicted and described. We need only recall the possible consequences of qualitative and/or quantitative modifications of intestinal microbiota on vitamin D absorption, which are secondary to, for example, hypochylia, alterations in intestinal motility or the administration of probiotics. Intestinal dysbiosis also seems to be involved in the pathogenesis of non-alcoholic fatty liver disease, (NAFLD). In the last few years, many epidemiological studies have reported that patients affected by NAFLD have significantly lower circulating 25(OH)D levels compared to control populations.

Low vitamin D₃ levels have also been linked to increased histological severity of NAFLD. Although the aetiopathogenesis of the mechanisms that can account for this association are still not clear, it has been proposed that vitamin D₃ can have important hepatoprotective effects. In particular, *in vitro* studies have shown that vitamin D₃ is able to positively modulate insulin signalling (by improving insulin resistance at the hepatic level as well) and reduce the proliferation of fibroblasts and collagen production. To date, however, the literature has not provided us with broad prospective cohort studies or ample randomised clinical studies which have assessed a possible correlation between circulating vitamin D₃ levels and the risk of developing or aggravating NAFLD. Such studies are necessary in order to confirm the biological plausibility and possible causal role of vitamin D₃ in the development and progression of NAFLD.

Nonetheless, as you will read below, the recently published results of prospective cohort and Mendelian randomization studies effectively suggest that maintaining sufficient 25(OH)D levels may constitute an efficient approach in the primary and secondary prevention of NAFLD.

In addition, let me point out that we should begin considering NAFLD as one of the pathologies that causes secondary osteoporosis. This finding has emerged from a meta-analysis that was recently published in *Osteoporosis International*¹, which reports a significant correlation between

Correspondence

Maurizio Rossini

maurizio.rossini@univr.it

How to cite this article: Rossini M. Editorial. Vitamin D - UpDates 2022;5(4):134-135.

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NAFLD and the prevalence and risk of osteoporosis and fractures, especially in males. This represents another reason to consider administering vitamin D to these patients. What do you think?

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The complex (and unknown) interaction between vitamin D and intestinal microbiota

VITAMIN D
UpDAtes

2022;5(4):136-141

<https://doi.org/10.30455/2611-2876-2022-7e>

Giorgio Carlino¹, Rachele Ciccocioppo²

¹ Digestive Endoscopy Unit, Fondazione Policlinico Universitario Agostino Gemelli IRCCS, Rome; ² Gastroenterology Unit, Department of Medicine, AOUII Policlinico G.B. Rossi, University of Verona; Italy

Summary

Both developed and developing countries are witnessing a critical increase in chronic inflammatory diseases that target different organs and especially affect productive age people. Therefore, it is implicit that environmental factors – modes of delivery and breastfeeding, nutrition, pollution, food additives, medicines, and smoking, to name just a few – play an important role in the origin and persistence of organ damage. The main way by which these factors carry out their actions is represented by intestinal microbiota, which constitutes a complex and changing living ecosystem located in the digestive tract and which performs basic functions of homeostasis not only for the intestine but also for the entire human organism. Parallel to this phenomenon, in the last few years, researchers have become aware of the extra-skeletal effects of vitamin D, above all regarding the maintenance of immunological tolerance and strengthening of the intestinal barrier. In addition, a large portion of circulating vitamin D comes through diet and must therefore be absorbed at the intestinal level. The hypothesis of an interaction between vitamin D and intestinal microbiota, therefore, seems plausible, especially in cases of qualitative or quantitative alterations of the latter. Likewise, the possible effects of vitamin D supplementation on the composition of the microbiota itself must be taken into consideration. These are the topics discussed in this article.

INTRODUCTION

When we talk about vitamin D, or calciferol, we are referring to a family of lipid compounds that derive from steroids, which are indispensable for the human organism, whose recommended serum levels are > 30 ng/mL¹. Daily requirements are satisfied both through exposure to sunlight and diet. In the first case, the 7-dehydrocholesterol at the skin level is transformed into vitamin D₃ (cholecalciferol) by means of a photochemical reaction, while in the second the vitamin is absorbed from foods of animal origin (D₃, cholecalciferol), such as milk and dairy products, and vegetables (D₂, ergocalciferol), such as fresh or dried mushrooms¹.

The latter forms are structurally different – because of the characteristics of the lateral

chain connected to the sterol – but functionally similar. They need to be emulsified and incorporated into micelles through the activity of lecithin and bile salts to be absorbed by the intestine. Here they cross the apical membrane of enterocytes by means of both a passive diffusion mechanism and specific protein transporters (Niemann-Pick C1-Like 1, Scavenger receptor class B type 1, CD36, ATP-Binding Cassette transporter A1)². Once inside the enterocyte, vitamin D is incorporated into the chylomicrons, which cross the basal membrane and reach the lymphatic circulation. Whether it is produced in the skin or absorbed through nutrition, vitamin D is biologically inactive: for this reason, it is considered a prohormone. To become active, it requires two-step-hydroxylation, which is first carried

Correspondence

Rachele Ciccocioppo

rachele.ciccocioppo@univr.it

Conflict of interest

The authors state that there are no conflicts of interest.

How to cite this article: Carlino G, Ciccocioppo R. The complex (and little known) interaction between vitamin D and intestinal microbiota. Vitamin D – Updates 2022;5(4):136-141. <https://doi.org/10.30455/2611-2876-2022-7e>

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out by the 25-hydroxylase at the 25(OH) position in the liver and later by the vitamin D 1alpha-hydroxylase enzyme at the 1(OH) position in the kidneys, giving rise to the form 1,25(OH)₂ D (calcitriol) ¹.

From this basis, we see that any disturbance to the digestive tract – meant not anatomically as a mucosal layer but rather functionally as the intestinal barrier, microbiota, and bile salts – has effects on vitamin D availability. In addition, the effect of oral vitamin D supplementation on intestinal microbiota is little known. The aim of this article is therefore to summarise our current state of knowledge on the interaction between vitamin D and intestinal microbiota, considering that both carry out important roles in modulating the immune system and in the pathogenesis of many chronic inflammatory diseases.

INTESTINAL MICROBIOTA

At birth, a multitude of microorganisms populates the human body: these include bacteria, funguses, viruses, phages, and archaea, collectively known as microbiota. Along its surface of approximately 400 m², the digestive tract hosts the most abundant and diverse microbial community of our organism, which is made up of more than 100 trillion microorganisms ³. These encode more than three million genes, which in turn are responsible for synthesising thousands of metabolites ⁴. This ecosystem plays an important role in basic functions for the homeostasis of our organism, such as resistance to colonisation by pathogenic microorganisms, maintenance of the integrity of the intestinal barrier and epithelial turnover, synthesis and absorption of nutrients and metabolites (vitamins, amino acids, lipids, bile salts, and short-chain fatty acids), development and modulation of the peripheral immune system, and regulation of nutritional status ³.

Thanks to the possibility to identify the hypervariable regions of the 16S subunit of bacterial rRNA ⁵, the best known is the bacterial population, which is classified based on its taxonomy in phyla, classes, orders, families, genera, and species ⁴. Studies focusing on its qualitative and quantitative characterisation have shown that its composition changes according to

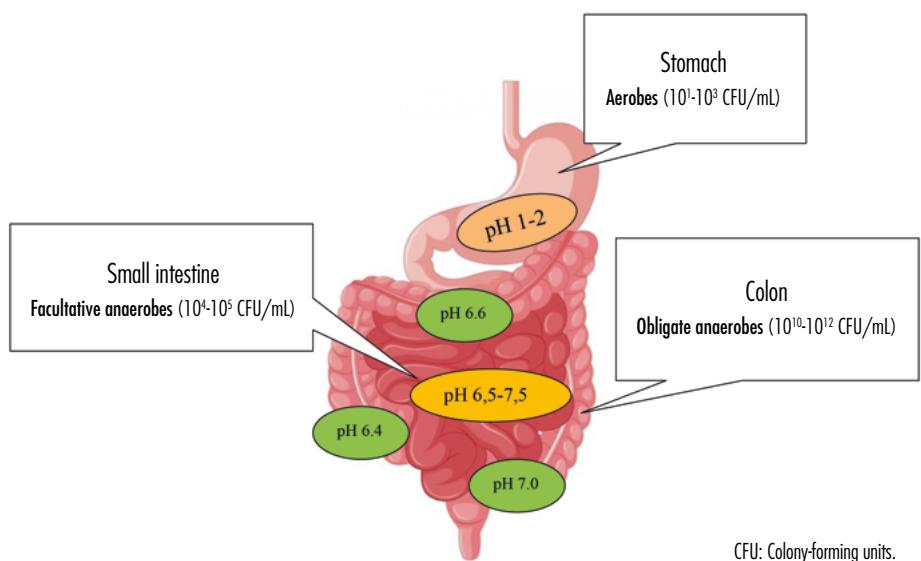


FIGURE 1.

The qualitative/quantitative composition of intestinal microbiota changes in different sections of the digestive tract according to such variables as pH, partial oxygen tension and intestinal motility. Alterations in these factors result from such conditions as gastric hypochylia, intestinal dysmotility, presence of blind loops and modifications of the ileocecal valve. They cause bacterial overgrowth of the small intestine via the descending or ascending pathway.

the section of the digestive tract (Fig. 1), as it is affected by both intrinsic factors (such as pH, oxygen tension, and intestinal motility) and extrinsic ones (modes of delivery, types of breastfeeding, diet, urban or rural environment, number of components of the nuclear family, physical activity and exposure to xenobiotics) ^{3,4}. Although each individual develops specific microbiota, numerous studies have allowed researchers to establish the profile of "healthy" ("eubiotic") microbiota, characterised by a relative abundance of the phyla *Bacteroidetes* (in particular the *Bacteroides* and *Prevotella* genera) and *Firmicutes* (in particular the *Lactobacillus*, *Clostridium*, *Enterococcus*, and *Faecalibacterium* genera), and above all possessing richness and diversity ^{3,4}. On the other hand, all conditions which contribute to disturbing this state are called "dysbiotic".

Due to the extraordinary ability of intestinal microbiota to affect the homeostasis of the human organism, it is not surprising that dysbiosis has been identified in various pathological conditions, both intestinal – such as irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), inflammatory bowel diseases (IBDs),

celiac disease – and extra-intestinal – such as obesity and metabolic syndrome, rheumatological diseases, psoriasis, Alzheimer's disease, and Parkinson's disease, to name only a few ^{3,4}. To date, however, it is still not completely clear whether alterations of the intestinal microbiota are the cause or effect of pathological conditions, and above all by which mechanisms microbiota trigger and maintain a pathological state. In this regard, because of the immunomodulatory role of vitamin D, we cannot exclude the possibility that the influence of microbiota in the pathogenesis of many chronic inflammatory conditions occurs at least in part through variations in the availability of vitamin D and/or that the latter can cause qualitative and quantitative modifications in the composition of the microbiota.

EFFECTS OF VITAMIN D ON MICROBIOTA

An increasing number of studies have evaluated the effects of vitamin D on intestinal microbiota, in particular regarding IBDs, a multifactorial disease in which dysbiosis plays a leading role in causing and maintaining lesions ⁶. At the same time,

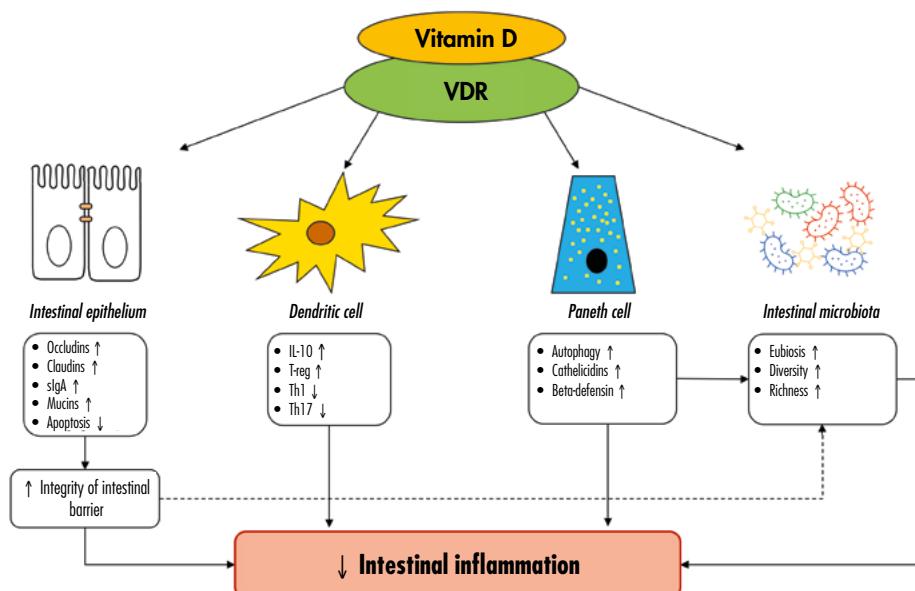
the find of low levels of vitamin D levels in patients affected by these conditions and, especially, the association of serum levels with disease activity, risk of relapse and response, and/or failure of therapies^{7,8} have sparked a growing interest in the possible role of vitamin D in the pathogenesis of IBDs. Scientific evidence derived mainly from experimental models suggests, on the one hand, that epigenetic modifications triggered by intestinal inflammation can reduce the expression of the gene which encodes vitamin D's nuclear receptor (VDR)⁹ and, on the other, that the signaling pathway of vitamin D/VDR can regulate various factors involved in intestinal inflammation^{7,10}. In particular, vitamin D appears to influence the integrity of the intestinal barrier by modulating the expression of components of tight and anchoring junction⁷ and stimulating the release of antimicrobial peptides (cathelicidins and beta-defensins) on the part of Paneth cells¹¹ and mucins; in this context, it has an immunomodulatory effect, both by inhibiting the release of pro-inflammatory cytokines and stimulating the release of anti-inflammatory cytokines and the induction of regulatory T lymphocytes^{7,10,11} (Fig. 2).

Regarding its effects on intestinal microbiota, vitamin D supplementation in a small cohort of subjects affected by ulcerative colitis reduced *Ruminococcus gnavus*, even though it did not modify alpha diversity (the bacterial diversity index within a sample)¹²; meanwhile, in subjects affected by Crohn's disease – but not in the control group – supplementation caused a relative increase in such eubiotic bacteria as *Alistipes*, *Parabacteroides*, *Roseburia* and *Faecalibacterium*¹³. The absence of modifications in faecal microbiota following vitamin D supplementation in healthy patients was confirmed by one study¹⁴, but not in others: in these, by contrast, an increase in eubiotic indices was found, such as alpha and beta diversity (the index of bacterial diversity between different samples). Furthermore, the latter group of studies showed an increase in the *Bacteroides/Firmicutes* ratio as well as an increase in protective strains such as *Akkermansia muciniphila*^{15,16}. A possible explanation for this apparent discrepancy might be found in vitamin D's ability to especially influence the microbiota adhering to the intestinal mucous: this discrepancy would thus be evaluated by endoscopic

tissue sampling more than by using luminal microbiota faecal samples. In particular, the most important effects seem to occur in the upper intestinal tract, where following eight weeks of supplementation a decrease in opportunistic pathogens (such as the *Pseudomonas*, *Escherichia*, and *Shigella* species), as well as an increase in richness, were found¹⁷.

These findings have stimulated interest in investigating the potential role of vitamin D in IBS as well. This is a chronic condition that affects at least 10% of the world's population; it is characterised by symptoms such as abdominal pain or discomfort, intestinal meteorism, and alterations in defecation, especially constipation and/or diarrhoea¹⁸. Its aetiopathogenesis involves factors that influence the function of the gut-brain axis and which include altered intestinal permeability and dysbiosis^{18,19}. In addition, vitamin D deficiency has often been detected in this condition, which is probably linked to changes in eating habits, mostly the exclusion of milk and dairy products. On the opposite, proper supplementation has been shown to contribute to an improvement in both quality of life and intestinal symptoms¹⁹. Nonetheless, in light of the dearth of clinical studies, differences in their designs, the heterogeneous nature of the subjects examined, and inadequate attention paid to confounding factors – such as exposure to sunlight and diet – we are not able to establish the role played by vitamin D in IBS and, above all, to determine whether this role is in part mediated by alterations in intestinal microbiota.

Intestinal dysbiosis also seems to be involved in the pathogenesis of fatty liver disease associated with metabolic syndrome²⁰, the main cause of chronic liver disease in the western world as well as the condition associated with a greater risk of vitamin D deficiency²¹. In particular, vitamin D supplementation in this pathology seems to contrast the fibrogenesis resulting from the activation of the transforming growth factor B pathway in hepatic stellate cells²². In addition, supplementation appears to improve several laboratory parameters, such as levels of transaminases, triglycerides, fasting glycaemia, and insulin²³.



IL: Interleukin; slgA: Secretory immunoglobulin A; T-reg: Regulatory T lymphocytes; Th: T helper lymphocytes; VDR: Vitamin D receptor.

FIGURE 2.

Effects on vitamin D on intestinal ecosystem: see text.

At the same time, the possible effect of vitamin D supplementation on intestinal microbiota in this specific clinical setting has still not been investigated. Regarding the metabolic syndrome, *in vivo* studies on both animal models and humans suggest that intestinal microbiota plays a role in the pathogenesis of obesity. In this regard, transplanting the microbiota of obese subjects clearly causes obesity in experimental animals⁴. Furthermore, an increased *Firmicutes/Bacteroidetes* ratio, high levels of *Ruminococcaceae* and *Lactobacillus*, and low ones of *Bacteroidaceae*, *Bacteroides*, and *Bifidobacterium vulgatum* seem to be connected with obesity⁴. In this connection, we should recall those findings which show that vitamin D supplementation (though not the placebo) caused an increase in the genera *Lachnospira* and *Coprococcus* (which were found to be associated with a state of health) and a reduction of the genera *Blautia* and *Ruminococcus* (which are relatively abundant in inflammatory and dysmetabolic conditions) in a cohort of overweight and/or obese subjects (body mass index $\geq 25 \text{ kg/m}^2$)²⁴.

Ageing also represents a condition frequently linked to both vitamin D deficiency²⁵ and variations in the composition of intestinal microbiota⁴. A cross-sectional, multi-centric study of 567 community-dwelling elderly Americans showed that higher serum concentrations of calcitriol were connected to greater alpha and beta diversity²⁶. In addition, serum levels of calcitriol were positively correlated to microorganisms belonging above all to the *Firmicutes* phylum²⁶, producers of butyric acid, a short-chain fatty acid with known beneficial effects on intestinal homeostasis^{3,4}.

Finally, an elegantly designed, randomised, double-blind study was conducted on 41 subjects affected by cystic fibrosis, a chronic, genetic disease that causes secretion thickening, especially in the lungs, skin, and digestive system (above all the pancreas) as a result of the functional loss of the cystic fibrosis transmembrane conductance regulator (CFTR), an ionic channel which regulates the flow of chloride ions – and therefore also of water – in epithelial cells. The results of

this study showed a relative abundance of the *Bacteroida* class in subjects with normal vitamin D levels, while in those with low levels a relative abundance of *Gammaproteobacteria* was detected, a class of gram-negative bacteria which includes such pathogens as *Yersinia Pestis*, *Vibrio Cholera*, *E. coli*, and *Pseudomonas aeruginosa*; the last named is often responsible for pulmonary infections in such patients²⁷. In addition, successive vitamin D supplementation to normalise serum levels caused a relative increase of the *Lactococcus* genus and a reduction of the *Veillonella* (belonging to the *Erysipelotrichaceae* family), whose detection in broncho-alveolar lavage samples was associated with a subclinical inflammatory status²⁷.

EFFECTS OF MICROBIOTA ON VITAMIN D

Moving to consider the consequences that qualitative and quantitative modifications of intestinal microbiota or the administration of probiotics can have on the absorption and therefore on the availability of vitamin D, an example is provided by bacterial overgrowth of the small intestine: as a result of the presence of one or more predisposing factors, such as gastric hypochylia (caused by chronic prazole therapy, atrophic gastritis, and surgeries), alterations of gut motility (mostly in diabetes, systemic autoimmune diseases such as scleroderma, diverticulosis, stenosis, and intestinal by-passes) and ileocecal valve anatomy (Crohn's disease, surgery), an overgrowth/contamination of the intestinal flora via descending or ascending way, respectively, has been found²⁸. In the ascending way, in particular, the contamination of the small intestine by anaerobic and Gram-negative bacteria causes the breakdown of micelles, resulting in poor absorption of fat-soluble vitamins, including vitamin D. This results in a clinical picture characterised not only by intestinal meteorism and diarrhoea, but also – over time – osteoporosis, anaemia and peripheral neuropathies due to vitamin B12 deficiency²⁸. Furthermore, the breakdown of micelles alters the enterohepatic circulation of bile salts. Upon reaching the colon in great quantities, these cause the onset

of "choleretic" diarrhoea, which is linked to heightened intracellular production of cyclic AMP and GMP, which in turn increase the active secretion of water and electrolytes. Finally, microbial flora can also damage the apical portion of the enterocytes, with the loss or reduction of potential enzymatic activity, including lactase, and the consequent development of symptoms of lactose intolerance. Regarding the possibility that probiotics (defined by the World Health Organisation as live organisms able to produce beneficial effects) can influence circulating vitamin D levels, let us now consider the sparse evidence presented by the literature. In a post hoc analysis of a randomised controlled clinical study, administration of the probiotic *Lactobacillus reuteri* NCIMB 30242 BSH-active [expressing the enzyme accountable for the hydrolase of bile salts (BSH) and their deconjugation²⁹, with a resulting decreased ability to form micelles] for nine weeks to dyslipidaemic subjects produced a statistically significant increase in circulating vitamin D levels compared to those who received a placebo. It is worth noting here that the effect was selective on vitamin D and not on other fat-soluble vitamins³⁰. In addition, in clinical studies conducted on patients who underwent bariatric surgery (with one anastomosis gastric bypass or with Roux-en-Y anastomosis) administration of probiotics (including the association of *Lactobacillus acidophilus* NCFM and *Bifidobacterium lactis* Bi-07) up until three months after surgery caused an increase in serum vitamin D levels^{31,32}. Among possible explanations, the authors propose increased absorption of vitamin D thanks to the acidification of the intestinal content secondary to the synthesis of lactic acid, stimulation of the 25-hydroxylase vitamin D enzyme, and/or an increase of the 7-dehydrocholesterol synthesis³⁰. Finally, we should note a possible functional interaction between resident microbiota and/or probiotics and VDR. In animal models of colitis, anti-inflammatory actions of butyric acid may be linked to the increased gene expression of VDR triggered by the same compound^{7,33}.

EFFECTS OF MICROBIOTA ON LACTOSE ABSORPTION

Lactose is the main sugar present in the milk of mammals. It is a disaccharide composed of glucose and galactose, whose intestinal absorption depends on the hydrolysis carried out by the lactase enzyme (beta-galactosidase) present on the brush borders of enterocytes. Deficiency of this enzyme, whether congenital (a quite rare condition, typically found in children) or acquired (a very frequent condition, typical of adults), causes inadequate digestion of lactose: remaining in the intestinal lumen, it is catabolized by resident flora, with the production of small, osmotically active molecules (short-chain fatty acids) and gas (carbon dioxide, methane, and hydrogen), with the resulting development of symptoms of intolerance, such as diarrhea, intestinal meteorism and abdominal cramps³⁴. In particular, acquired deficiency can be primary – and therefore linked to a genetically determined deficiency, which affects roughly two-thirds of Caucasians – or secondary to enteropathies such as coeliac disease and Crohn's disease, or drug- and radiation-induced enteropathies, to cite the most frequent cases. In addition, it can also result from bacterial contamination of the small intestine because of the above-mentioned capacity of bacteria to damage the brush borders of enterocytes, where the activity of disaccharides takes place.

It is well known that the onset of ailments linked to undigested milk and dairy products induces subjects to avoid these food-stuffs, with significant nutritional repercussions resulting above all from inadequate vitamin D intake³⁴. Some of these consequences are secondary to qualitative and quantitative modifications of intestinal microbiota, which are deprived of their share of *Lactobacillaceae*, with the resulting loss of their important immunomodulatory role.

Equally well known is that the development of symptoms of lactose intolerance depends not only on quantities consumed but also on the capacity of the individual's microbiota to break down disaccharides^{34,35}. To date, strains with recognised lactose activity include *Bacteroides/Prevotella*, *Bifidobacterium*, and *Eubac-*

*terium rectale/Clostridium coccoides*³⁶. For this reason, a possible therapeutic strategy consists of the use of probiotics, as shown in some cases in which intake of *Lactobacillus casei Shirota* and *Bifidobacterium breve Yakult* for 4 weeks³⁷ or *Lactobacillus reuteri* for 10 days³⁸ led to a reduction of intolerance symptoms and of hydrogen levels in breath tests for lactose. Finally, it is worth noting that some findings show that milk intake in subjects with lactase insufficiency is connected to increased levels of indolepropionic acid, a metabolite of tryptophan produced by intestinal microbiota, in particular by *Bifidobacterium*, and inversely linked to the risk of developing type 2 diabetes mellitus³⁹.

CONCLUSIONS

Growing evidence shows that vitamin D could play a physiological role in the modulation of intestinal microbiota and that several of its systemic immunoregulatory effects are linked to this latter. Nonetheless, the complexity of the universe represented by intestinal microbiota, together with the limited methods available to explore it, makes difficult a full understanding of its possible role in various clinical scenarios. As a result, identifying preventive or therapeutic strategies is problematic. We, therefore, recommend supplementation for subjects with vitamin D deficiency, since the persistence of this state over time could lead to an alteration of not only osteo-metabolic but also nutritional and immunological homeostasis.

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Circulating vitamin D₃ levels and risk of non-alcoholic fatty liver disease: is there a connection?

VITAMIN D
UpDAtes

2022;5(4):142-144

<https://doi.org/10.30455/2611-2876-2022-8e>

Giovanni Targher

Section of Diabetes and Endocrinology, Department of Medicine, University of Verona

Vitamin D₃ deficiency has been associated with the co-existence of many non-skeletal chronic pathologies (including obesity, type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, several types of tumours and non-alcoholic fatty liver disease), suggesting the possibility that this vitamin can have multiple and beneficial pleiotropic effects in extra-skeletal contexts, thanks to the ubiquitous distribution of its specific receptor¹⁻⁵.

Non-alcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD) is one of these extra-skeletal chronic pathologies associated with low circulating vitamin D₃ levels. This disease has been the focus of significant scientific research, especially in the last 6-7 years⁶.

NAFLD includes a broad spectrum of liver pathologies characterised by an accumulation of triglycerides in the liver in subjects without excessive alcohol consumption. The range of these pathologies includes simple steatosis and non-alcoholic steatohepatitis (NASH), which can lead to cirrhosis and even to hepatocellular carcinoma⁷. Today, NAFLD represents the most common form of chronic liver disease in western countries: it is estimated that it is present in roughly 25-30% of the general adult population^{8,9}. Globally, its prevalence is progressively increasing in many parts of the world, similar to what has been observed for the incidence of obesity and type 2 diabetes, two metabolic pathologies with which NAFLD is closely connected, as they represent the most important risk factors for the disease^{9,10}.

The natural onset and progression of NAFLD toward its most advanced histological stages is explained by several risk factors (genetic, epigenetic, environmental and clinical) which take into account a broad range of pathological phenotypes resulting from it and for which different in-

dividual therapeutic approaches may be necessary⁷. This characteristic distinguishes NAFLD from other chronic liver diseases, in which the aetiological agent is well defined (as in the liver pathology caused by alcohol abuse or viral hepatitis), or for which there exists a specific pharmacological treatment (as in the case of viral and autoimmune hepatitis). The increasing importance of NAFLD from clinical and public health points of view is also determined by the fact that this pathology is not only linked to an increased risk of progression toward NASH and cirrhosis but that it is also frequently correlated to an increased risk of developing significant extrahepatic complications, including cardiovascular disease (which represents the main cause of death in this population of patients), chronic kidney disease, type 2 diabetes and the development of some types of tumours (especially colorectal, pancreas and breast cancers)^{7,11}. For these reasons, from a clinical point of view it is particularly important to know the natural evolution of NAFLD and to identify the main risk factors which can modify its progression toward hepatic and extrahepatic complications.

Many epidemiological studies of the last 6-7 years have shown that patients with NAFLD have significantly lower circulating 25-hydroxyvitamin D₃ levels compared to control populations without fatty liver disease; these studies have further correlated low vitamin D₃ levels with greater histological severity of NAFLD, independently of the coexistence of obesity, diabetes and other typical features of metabolic syndrome^{6,12}. Although the aetiopathogenetic mechanisms which can explain this association are still not completely clear, it has been hypothesised that vitamin D₃ can play an important hepatoprotective role. Findings from both experimental and

Correspondence

Giovanni Targher

giovanni.targher@univr.it

Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

How to cite this article: Targher G. Circulating vitamin D₃ levels and risk of non-alcoholic fatty liver disease: is there a connection? Vitamin D – Updates 2022;5(4):142-144. <https://doi.org/10.30455/2611-2876-2022-8e>

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in vitro studies have shown that vitamin D₃ is able to positively modulate insulin signalling (by improving insulin resistance at the muscular and hepatic levels), reduce the production of multiple prothrombotic, procoagulant and pro-oxidant factors and perform immunomodulatory actions, in addition to reducing the proliferation of fibroblasts and the production of collagen^{6,12}. To date, however, the literature has not produced broad prospective cohort studies or ample randomised clinical trials which evaluate a possible correlation between circulating vitamin D₃ levels and risk of developing NAFLD; nor have researchers examined whether extended vitamin D₃ supplementation is able to reduce the risk of the development or progression of NAFLD/NASH (which is documented by means of a hepatic biopsy, the 'gold standard' for the diagnosis and staging of this liver pathology). Such data is clinically important so as to be able to confirm the biological plausibility and possible causal role of vitamin D₃ in the development and progression of NAFLD.

A recent observational study conducted by Kim et al. aimed to provide an answer to one of these specific points. The "Kangbuk Samsung Health Study", an interesting analysis of a broad cohort of Korean subjects¹³, had two main objectives: (1) to determine if circulating baseline levels of 25-hydroxyvitamin D₃ could predict the risk of developing new incident forms of NAFLD and/or the probability of resolving known forms of NAFLD at follow-up; and (2) to examine the correlation of temporal variations of 25-hydroxyvitamin D₃ levels, measured at baseline and follow-up, with

the probability of developing and/or resolving NAFLD¹³. With regard to the first objective (evaluation of the association between baseline vitamin D₃ levels and incidence of NAFLD), the authors screened a cohort of over 139,000 adult subjects (~44% males, average age 36.8 years, average BMI 22 kg/m²) who had no history of alcohol abuse, NAFLD or other known liver pathologies¹³. These subjects were not selected on the basis of their baseline vitamin status: ~77% of the sample had baseline 25-hydroxyvitamin D₃ levels < 20 ng/ml. Circulating levels of 25-hydroxyvitamin D₃ were measured in all participants, and a liver ultrasound was performed at both baseline and follow-up. In the first part of the study, as reported in Table I, the authors clearly showed the existence of an inverse relation between circulating 25-hydroxyvitamin D₃ levels and risk of developing NAFLD (upon performance of the liver ultrasound) during the follow-up period (median time of roughly four years). This risk was independent of multiple known risk factors and other possible confounding influences¹³. To examine the link between baseline circulating levels of 25-hydroxyvitamin D₃ and the probability of resolving known forms of NAFLD during follow-up, a sample of roughly 48,700 subjects affected by NAFLD at baseline was analysed. In this case – as summarised in Table II – the authors reported a positive correlation of dose-effect type between circulating levels of 25-hydroxyvitamin D₃ at baseline and the probability of observing resolution of NAFLD at follow-up¹³.

In connection with the second objective of the study (examination of the correlation between temporal variations of vitamin D₃ levels and the probability of developing and/or resolving NAFLD), the authors found that an increase in circulating levels of 25-hydroxyvitamin D₃ – passing, that is, from insufficient baseline values (< 20 ng/ml) to adequate ones (≥ 20 ng/ml) at follow-up (median period of 1.8 years) – was associated with a significantly reduced risk of developing NAFLD (adjusted Hazard Ratio [HR] 0.87, 95% confidence interval [IC] 0.82-0.91) in subjects who did not have NAFLD at baseline; on the contrary, consistently adequate values of 25-hydroxyvitamin D₃, at both baseline and follow-up (≥ 20 ng/ml), were correlated to a greater probability of resolution of NAFLD (adjusted HR 1.10, 95% IC 1.02-1.20) in subjects with NAFLD at baseline¹³.

The results of this broad prospective cohort study therefore suggest that maintaining sufficient levels of 25-hydroxyvitamin D₃ can constitute an efficient approach in the primary and secondary prevention of NAFLD¹³. Nonetheless, the observational design of this study does not allow us to posit any causal inference regarding the observed correlation between levels of 25-hydroxyvitamin D₃ and risk of NAFLD, although it is in line with the recent observations of a Mendelian randomisation study, conducted on three European populations, which found a significant inverse relation between genetically predicted levels of 25-hydroxyvitamin D₃ and risk of NAFLD¹⁴. Other crucial limitations of the study by Kim et al.¹³ include the fact that

TABLE I.

Risk of developing NAFLD (at the liver ultrasound) at follow-up based on circulating levels of hydroxyvitamin D₃ in subjects without NAFLD at baseline (n = 139,599) (from Kim et al., 2022¹³, modified).

Baseline 25(OH)D, ng/mL	Persons-years	Incident cases of NAFLD (n)	HR (95% CI) adjusted for gender and age	HR (95% CI) adjusted for multiple confounding factors
< 10	114,688	4,310	1.00 (reference)	1.00 (reference)
10-19	343,137	16,487	0.95 (95% IC 0.92-0.99)	0.89 (95% IC 0.86-0.92)
20-29	102,627	5,740	0.91 (95% IC 0.88-0.95)	0.81 (95% IC 0.78-0.85)
≥ 30	20,569	994	0.76 (95% IC 0.71-0.82)	0.72 (95% IC 0.67-0.77)
P-value per trend			< 0.001	< 0.001

TABLE II.

Resolution of NAFLD (at liver ultrasound) at follow-up based on circulating levels of hydroxyvitamin D₃ in subjects with NAFLD at baseline (n = 48,702) (from Kim et al., 2022¹³, modified).

Baseline 25(OH)D, ng/mL	Persons-years	Cases with resolution of NAFLD (n)	HR (95% CI) adjusted for gender and age	HR (95% CI) adjusted for multiple confounding factors
<10	25,318	1,819	1.00 (reference)	1.00 (reference)
10-19	118,651	8,202	1.12 (95% IC 1.06-1.18)	1.09 (95% IC 1.03-1.15)
20-29	41,262	2,929	1.17 (95% IC 1.10-1.24)	1.13 (95% IC 1.06-1.21)
≥30	6,140	499	1.23 (95% IC 1.12-1.36)	1.21 (95% IC 1.09-1.35)
P-value per trend			<0.001	<0.001

the NAFLD diagnosis was established by means of a liver ultrasound, which may not be sufficiently accurate to show the presence of a slightly fatty liver, and that the population of the study was made up exclusively of Korean subjects (therefore limiting the extendibility of these observations to different ethnicities).

In spite of these defects, the findings of this broad longitudinal study¹³ convincingly demonstrate the need to conduct broad randomised clinical trials in the near future with an adequate treatment duration in order to evaluate the possible benefits of vitamin D₃ supplementation on the risk of the development and progression of NAFLD/NASH (studies in which these hepatic outcomes are examined by liver biopsies). In addition, such trials must also take into account the vitamin D status of the participants, given that it is reasonable to suppose the any benefits from high-dose vitamin D₃ supplementation on NAFLD/NASH can be greater in patients with vitamin D deficiency with respect to those with normal circulating vitamin D₃ levels.

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