

Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

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“Vitamin B-12 Deficiency and How to Recognize It”

Vitamin B-12 deficiency can be sneaky and harmful. Spotting the signs of vitamin B-12 deficiency early on and getting the right treatment can improve a person's outlook. In most cases, doctors can treat vitamin B-12 deficiency. Vitamin B-12 deficiency may lead to a reduction in healthy red blood cells (anemia). Symptoms of vitamin B-12 deficiency include fatigue, low mood, and nerve problems. Vitamin B-12 deficiency may affect between 1.5 and 15.0 percent of people. The body needs vitamin B-12 for a range of bodily functions. Being deficient in vitamin B-12 causes physical and psychological symptoms, including nerve problems, fatigue, and difficulty thinking and people with long-term deficiency may have long-lasting effects, such as nerve damage. Most vitamin B-12 deficiency symptoms occur due to a lack of red blood cells, which means that the body does not get enough oxygen. The body's oxygen supply is crucial for many aspects of health and insufficient oxygen here may lead to a person both feeling and being sick. The reduced amount of oxygen reaching the brain might be to blame for the thinking and reasoning problems, also called cognitive impairment. One study even linked low vitamin B-12 levels to an increased risk of Alzheimer's disease, vascular dementia, and Parkinson's disease. The human body does not create vitamin B-12, so people must get this nutrient from their diet. Adults need around 2.4 micrograms of vitamin B-12 each day. Other factors increasing a deficiency include being older, taking anti-acid medications for an extended period and weight loss surgery. Vitamin B-12 is a water-soluble vitamin that is present in animal-based foods, such as red meat, poultry, eggs, dairy and fish. Eating a vegan diet increases the risk of vitamin B-12 deficiency. If a person does not eat animal products, they will need to add vegetarian and vegan sources of vitamin B-12 to their diet. These include fortified cereals, plant milks, bread, and nutritional yeast. As vitamin B-12 deficiency shares many symptoms with other nutritional deficiencies and health conditions, it is possible that people may neither notice it nor get a diagnosis. Symptoms may include tingling of hands or feet, trouble walking, poor balance, pale skin, fatigue, a fast heart rate, shortness of breath, mouth pain, problems thinking, irritability, nausea, diarrhea, decreased appetite and weight loss.

In the America that I love, we will continue to avoid extreme or fad diets, emphasize fresh fruits and vegetables and exercise regularly. The best way for most people to get vitamin B-12 is in the diet. If a person cannot get enough from their usual diet, fortified foods and other dietary supplements may help. People who have trouble absorbing vitamin B-12 may need shots of the vitamin to treat their deficiency.

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