

the big "D"

why some kids are suffering from vitamin and mineral deficiencies and what you can do

The past few months have kept news outlets busy reporting growing health concerns about America's children. From Vitamin D deficiencies to the rise in kidney stones in very young babies and children, family diets have become the issue. In our fast-paced 24/7 world, we consume more and more fast and processed foods, and though the fat content in these foods is often addressed, they are also high in sodium. And while the switch to organic is wonderful in reducing the risk of consuming pesticides, organic diets may not get the necessary vitamins and minerals fortified milk and cereals offer, adding new concerns for parents.

"Interesting how we always circulate back to moderation," said Amy Puls, pediatric registered dietitian at TherapyWorks. "But it's really true. I see a lot of organic babies in my practice. And other parents will give too much of a good thing, like juice. When it comes to diet, somewhere in the middle is right."

Puls said Vitamin D is tricky. In years past, the sun provided our daily dose, but now with worries about skin cancer, children have less exposure to the sun. And many children do not play outside every day. Besides its historic benefit for helping build strong bones, new research shows that Vitamin D also can protect against diabetes, cancer, heart disease, and depression.

According to Puls, babies need

200 IU of Vitamin D daily, which can come from half a liter of fortified formula. Breast-fed babies need a supplement such as Tri-Vi-Sol, which should be discussed with the child's pediatrician. Older children need between 3 to 4 eight-ounce glasses of fortified milk daily, but parents often pull back from dairy if children show signs of being overweight.

"Overweight can often mean undernourished," explained Puls. "We think if a person is overweight, he is getting more than enough nutrients each day. That often isn't the case. And all milk and no water, or all bottled water, can lead to fluoride deficiencies."

Fluoride, like Vitamin D, is

critical for strong bone health, not just to prevent cavities in teeth. Softening of the bones is a growing concern in children's health, as it leads to more easily broken bones. Fluoridated tap water is the easiest source for this mineral, but a pediatrician or dentist can also offer fluoride supplement options.

Water can also help prevent kidney stones. Historically a problem for middle-aged adults, kidney stones can develop in children when they don't drink enough water, which helps dissolve calcium and other mineral deposits. Doctors also blame salty foods such as cheeseburgers and fries for this frightening new phenomenon. Parents need to limit salt and make



sure that children get several glasses of water per day. An easy way to check if children are getting enough fluids is to see if urine remains very light yellow to clear.

Iron deficiency causes anemia, and zinc deficiency leads to a host of health problems including growth failure, impaired taste and smell, and reduced resistance to infection. Both of these concerns usually occur in picky eaters, since zinc and iron come primarily from meat and beans, two food groups associated with finicky kids. Again, Puls recommends a talk with a pediatrician if your child isn't eating two to three servings of these foods per day.

"Two-thirds of children under 6 are picky eaters," Puls said. "The food choices they are picking aren't balanced enough, so look to a balance of carbs, proteins, fats, and the vitamins and minerals associated with them."

Puls suggests parents introduce a food five to 10 times within a two-week period. It's not just how many times the food is introduced, but how often in the short time frame, so kids can get used to the taste and texture.

"Also, don't get into the trap of letting kids pick the meal," suggested Puls. "You can still give them a choice, like if the family is having chicken and a vegetable, let the children's choice be whether they want noodles or rice."