

GETTING ENOUGH VITAMIN B₁₂

A lack of vitamin B₁₂ can make you anaemic, cause nerve damage and psychiatric abnormalities, and even raise your risk of heart disease. When did you last have your levels checked?

deficiency problems

In the early stages, vitamin B₁₂ deficiency may cause numbness, tingling, poor balance or fatigue. Fortunately, these are all reversible. It's the long-term lack of B₁₂ that's a serious cause for concern, since it can lead to irreversible brain damage.

An inadequate diet is one common reason for low levels of B₁₂, especially among vegans and vegetarians. However, approximately 95 per cent of the cases of B₁₂ deficiency occur among people who cannot absorb this vitamin into the body. Those over the age of 50 are at particular risk, as are people who are taking metformin medication for diabetes or pre-diabetes.

where to get B₁₂

Very small amounts of vitamin B₁₂ can be produced in the mouth and colon, but these are either insufficient to meet the daily requirement or too far down in the intestinal tract to be available for absorption, which occurs in the small intestine. Vitamin B₁₂ needs to come regularly from either food, supplements or injections.

► **Food:** Animal products such as eggs and dairy can supply B₁₂. Vegans need to use fortified plant foods such as soy milk, meat alternatives and yeast spreads. Unlike in the US, plant foods are not widely fortified with B₁₂ in Australia. Mushrooms, fermented soy products and sea vegetables are unreliable sources, as they contain low or inactive forms for the human body.

► **Supplements:** The human body needs at least 2.4 micrograms of vitamin B₁₂ per day, and even more for women who are pregnant or breastfeeding. Research shows that it's more effective to use a supplement with a lower dose (5–10 micrograms) every day rather than taking a single high dose weekly.

► **Injections** may be required for people whose doctor has confirmed that they cannot absorb vitamin B₁₂.

It's a good idea for those who are over 50, who are taking metformin, or who are vegan (or vegetarians who consume little or no dairy) to check their blood levels of B₁₂ annually.



Nutritionist Sue Radd is the award-winning author of *The Breakfast Book* and co-author of *Eat To Live*, internationally acclaimed for showing how savvy eating can combat cancer and heart disease and improve well-being. See www.sueradd.com for more nutrition information.