

Merry Sunshine and Walking: Is There a Connection?

As spring bursts forth each year with the warmth of sunshine and fresh smells of new plant life, we all crave to be out on the first sunny warm day, absorbing the sunshine, feeling the warmth of the sun, allowing our bodies, once again, to get soaked in the sun. We take our sweaters off and expose our arms and legs to the warmth of this spring renewal. The warm sun feels so good. Not only does the sun refresh us, but our bodies almost scream at us to require this early Spring sun bath. Why? Since many of us live in northern climates, we have very limited access to the sunrays during the winter months and guess what? Our bodies require vitamin D in order to process calcium. Without the sunshine vitamin, our bones and muscles become weak. How does this affect the institutionalized elderly? The institutionalized elderly are not allowed to go outside, its called wondering and doors are locked to keep them safely inside. Are they trying to get out into the sunshine to replenish their vitamin D? Has anyone considered that? If our 1.8 million elderly do not get enough sunshine they become vitamin D deficient and suffer from their non-ambulatory status. They simply stop walking if they are deprived of vitamin D and calcium in sufficient amounts. This is not new information, but from many conversations I have had recently with facilities, most are not aware of this problem and the facility caregivers continue to place their residents in wheelchairs and keep their residents inside. Let's look at changing this so we can get more of our institutionalized elderly up and walking the way they should be which returning to them a higher quality of life through sunshine.

Have you always wondered what causes non-ambulation in the elderly in nursing homes? Why are they almost always automatically given a wheelchair to use as part of the room service when they move into a long-term care facility? Is there a disease that causes non-ambulation? Strokes? Alzheimer's disease? Arthritis? This supposed "disease" that causes non-ambulation could be called osteomalacia, but it is actually a deficiency, not a disease. Osteomalacia results from vitamin D deficiency, caused by sunshine deprivation, which effects institutionalized elderly. Let's face it, the elderly are never outside in the sunshine and must just sit in their wheelchairs and see the advent of spring through their windows.

When the elderly complain of leg and back pain, which further results in muscle weakness and possible falls, the prescribed procedure is to place the person in a wheelchair. After three weeks in a wheelchair, the elderly person probably will never walk again, all because of osteomalacia, or simply vitamin D deficiency.

It has been reported by researchers who have studied and continue to study vitamin D deficiency who report that 70% to 80% of institutionalized elderly

suffer from vitamin D deficiency. With a simple blood test given, 25 hydroxy/ vitamin D, covered by Medicare CPT code 82306, the vitamin levels can be checked and additional vitamin D and calcium can be added to their diets or given in supplements. Since vitamin D is a vitamin that is stored in fat body tissue, then used when needed to process calcium, short suns baths, ten to fifteen minutes a couple of times a week, will certainly affect change on many of your residents. After their sun baths, they will require standing exercise many times a week to get their legs and arms moving again as they return to vertical integration or functional mobility or walking status.