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A Review of the Influence of Vitamin D Deficiency on Muscle Strength and Exercise Performance in Adults

Weronika Popow, ORCiD: https://orcid.org/0009-0005-6680-0750
e-mail: weronika.a.popow@gmail.com
ORLIK Medical Clinic Sp. z.o.o.
Motorowa 6, 04-041 Warszawa

Paulina Sadkowska, ORCiD: https://orcid.org/0009-0000-7409-2460
e-mail: pola.sadkowska@gmail.com
Samodzielny Publiczny Zespół Zakładów Opieki Zdrowotnej w Kozienicach
Aleja Generała Władysława Sikorskiego 10, 26-900 Kozienice

Katarzyna Jania, ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0004-4399-1016
e-mail: kasiakk19@gmail.com
Powiatowe Centrum Zdrowia w Otwocku Sp. z.o.o.
Batorego 44, 05-400 Otwock

Karolina Smolińska, ORCiD: https://orcid.org/0009-0001-4115-0297
e-mail: karolina.smolinska13@gmail.com
University Clinical Centre of the Medical University of Warsaw, The Infant Jesus Clinical Hospital Lindleya 4, 02-005 Warszawa

Julia Kulczycka, ORCiD: https://orcid.org/0009-0009-9624-8273
e-mail: julia.kulczycka99@gmail.com
Mazovia Rehabilitation Center STOCER Włodzimierz Roefler Hospital
Warsztatowa 1, 05-800 Pruszków

Michał Ciołkosz, ORCiD: https://orcid.org/0009-0008-7330-7069
e-mail: michal.ciolkosz1@gmail.com
Czerniakowski Hospital
Stępińska 19/25, 00-739 Warszawa

Tomasz Antczak, ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0006-3407-0981
e-mail: tomasz.antczak.pl@gmail.com
Warsaw Medical University
Żwirki i Wigury 61, 02-091 Warszawa

Monika Gajda-Bathelt, ORCiD: https://orcid.org/0009-0006-6231-607X
e-mail: monikagajda99@gmail.com
Beskid Oncology Center - Municipal Hospital of John Paul II in Bielsko-Biała
Wyzwolenia 18, 43-300 Bielsko-Biała

Monika Dąbek, ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0008-4403-556X
e-mail: monikadabek.96@gmail.com
Mazovia Rehabilitation Center STOCER Włodzimierz Roefler Hospital
Warsztatowa 1, 05-800 Pruszków
Zuzanna Perlicka, ORCiD: https://orcid.org/0009-0000-6153-7299
e-mail: zuzia.perlicka@gmail.com
Beskid Oncology Center - Municipal Hospital of John Paul II in Bielsko-Biała
Wyzwolenia 18, 43-300 Bielsko-Biała
Corresponding author:
Weronika Popow, e-mail: weronika.a.popow@gmail.com

Abstract

Background: Vitamin D plays a crucial role in maintaining musculoskeletal health. A growing body of evidence links vitamin D deficiency with decreased muscle strength and suboptimal exercise performance in adults.

Aim: This review aims to synthesize existing research on the effects of vitamin D deficiency on muscle strength and exercise efficiency in adults, identifying the physiological mechanisms involved and discussing the potential clinical implications.

Materials and Methods: A comprehensive literature search was conducted using PubMed, Scopus, and Web of Science databases. Studies included original research, systematic reviews, and meta-analyses published in English between 2000 and 2024. Keywords used included "vitamin D," "muscle strength," "exercise performance," "deficiency," and "adults."

Results: Most studies support a positive association between adequate vitamin D levels and improved muscle function. Deficiency is linked with reduced type II muscle fiber size, impaired neuromuscular function, and increased inflammation. Supplementation with vitamin D, particularly in individuals with vitamin D deficiency, often results in improved muscle strength and exercise performance, although findings vary by study design and population.

Conclusions: Vitamin D deficiency negatively affects muscle strength and exercise capacity in adults. Clinicians should consider monitoring and correcting vitamin D levels, particularly in populations at risk of deficiency. Future research should focus on identifying optimal dosing strategies and the long-term effects of supplementation.

Keywords: Vitamin D deficiency, muscle strength, exercise performance, adults, supplementation

1. Introduction

Vitamin D is a fat-soluble secosteroid hormone vital for calcium homeostasis and skeletal integrity. Beyond its classical roles, emerging research has revealed its importance in skeletal muscle physiology, immune regulation, and the control of inflammation (Holick, 2007). The active form, 1,25-dihydroxyvitamin D, exerts genomic and non-genomic effects on muscle cells, influencing strength and function (Ceglia, 2009).

Vitamin D deficiency, commonly defined as a serum 25(OH)D concentration below 50 nmol/L (20 ng/mL), is highly prevalent worldwide due to factors such as inadequate sun exposure, skin pigmentation, dietary insufficiency, and lifestyle changes (Cashman et al., 2016). This deficiency is associated not only with bone diseases, such as osteoporosis, but also with sarcopenia, frailty, and impaired physical performance (Bischoff-Ferrari et al., 2004). In athletes and physically active adults, low vitamin D levels may reduce exercise capacity and delay recovery, potentially increasing the risk of injury (Cannell et al., 2009).

This review aims to synthesize the current understanding of how vitamin D deficiency affects muscle strength and exercise efficiency in adults, examining the physiological mechanisms involved, and summarizing the clinical evidence to inform future research and clinical strategies.

2. Vitamin D Metabolism and Muscle Function

Vitamin D is synthesized in the skin via ultraviolet B (UVB) radiation or obtained through diet and supplements in two primary forms: D2 (ergocalciferol) and D3 (cholecalciferol). After hepatic conversion to 25-hydroxyvitamin D [25(OH)D], the primary circulating form, it undergoes renal hydroxylation to the active metabolite 1,25-dihydroxyvitamin D [1,25(OH)2D], which binds to vitamin D receptors (VDR) expressed in numerous tissues, including skeletal muscle (Norman, 2008).

The interaction of 1,25(OH)2D with VDR triggers gene transcription that regulates muscle cell proliferation, differentiation, calcium handling, and mitochondrial biogenesis. This genomic pathway, complemented by rapid non-genomic signaling, affects muscle contraction, growth, and repair (Ceglia and Harris, 2013). A deficiency in vitamin D leads to decreased VDR activation, impairing these processes and ultimately resulting in muscle weakness and atrophy.

2.1 Exercise Efficiency and Endurance:

Vitamin D's role in mitochondrial function and inflammation reduction translates into potential improvements in exercise efficiency. Studies assessing VO2 max, time to exhaustion, and recovery parameters have shown that supplementation can enhance aerobic performance, particularly in endurance athletes with a deficiency (Todd et al., 2015). Yet, variability in protocols and participant characteristics means results are not uniform.

In addition, vitamin D influences muscle recovery through satellite cell activation and protein synthesis pathways, which are crucial for muscle repair and adaptation post-exercise (Owens et al., 2015). Deficiency is associated with higher levels of muscle damage markers, such as creatine kinase, and longer recovery times, which can impair training outcomes and increase the risk of injury.

2.2 Muscle Recovery and Pathophysiology:

Vitamin D facilitates muscle regeneration via satellite cell activation and protein synthesis. Deficient individuals show prolonged recovery times post-exercise and higher levels of muscle damage markers (e.g., creatine kinase) (Owens et al., 2015).

3. Mechanistic Insights

3.1 Muscle Fiber Composition and Function:

Vitamin D preferentially influences type II (fast-twitch) muscle fibers responsible for generating high power and speed. Deficiency induces atrophy of these fibers and a shift towards predominance of type I (slow-twitch) fibers, which are less capable of rapid force generation (Ceglia, 2009). This shift in fiber composition contributes to decreased muscle strength and impaired explosive movements, which are critical in many sports and functional tasks.

3.2 Neuromuscular Coordination:

VDRs are present not only in muscle cells but also in motor neurons, suggesting vitamin D's involvement in neuromuscular junction integrity and nerve conduction. Vitamin D deficiency impairs neuromuscular signaling, leading to reduced reflexes, poor balance, and an increased risk of falls, particularly in older adults and athletes (Pfeifer et al., 2002).

3.3 Inflammation and Oxidative Stress:

Vitamin D exerts anti-inflammatory effects by downregulating pro-inflammatory cytokines (e.g., TNF-α, IL-6) and upregulating anti-inflammatory mediators. Deficiency leads to a pro-inflammatory state that exacerbates muscle catabolism, fatigue, and delayed recovery after exercise (Barker et al., 2013). Additionally, oxidative stress is increased in deficiency states, further impairing mitochondrial function and muscle endurance.

3.4 Mitochondrial Function and Energy Metabolism:

Vitamin D supports mitochondrial biogenesis and ATP synthesis in muscle cells, which is crucial for endurance and prolonged exercise. Deficiency compromises mitochondrial efficiency, reducing aerobic capacity and leading to an early onset of fatigue (Todd et al., 2015).

Biological Pathway	Impact of Deficiency	Effect on Strength/Performance
Muscle fiber growth/maintenance	Atrophy of type II fibers, fatty infiltration	↓ Strength ↓ performance
VDR pathway	Impaired protein synthesis and muscle growth	↓ Muscle mass, slower recovery
Calcium handling	Impaired contraction/relaxation cycle	Inefficient, weaker contractions
Mitochondrial function	Less ATP, more fatigue, increased oxidative stress	Early exhaustion, poor endurance
Protein synthesis/breakdown	Atrophy, less muscle synthesis	↓ Strength ↑ Risk of sarcopenia
Muscle regeneration	Poor satellite cell activation and muscle remodeling	Slower recovery, limited adaptation

Table 1: **Pathways Affected by Vitamin D Deficiency**

4. Evidence from Clinical Studies

4.1 Observational Studies:

Numerous studies have shown that adults with low serum 25(OH)D levels exhibit poorer muscle function, including reduced handgrip strength, slower gait speed, and increased incidence of falls (Bischoff-Ferrari et al., 2004; Gerdhem et al., 2005). Cross-sectional data often reveal a dose-response relationship, with lower vitamin D levels correlating with worse physical performance metrics.

4.2 Interventional Studies:

Randomized controlled trials (RCTs) investigating vitamin D supplementation provide mixed but generally positive evidence. In individuals with deficiencies, supplementation (usually 800–2000 IU daily) improves muscle strength, power, and balance, with notable improvements in lower extremity function (Beaudart et al., 2014; Stockton et al., 2011). Conversely, studies in vitamin D sufficient populations often fail to demonstrate significant benefits, highlighting the importance of baseline status.

Duration and dosage vary widely across studies, contributing to heterogeneity. Some meta-analyses support a protective role of supplementation against falls and fractures through muscle strengthening, particularly in older adults (Bischoff-Ferrari et al., 2009). However, the effects on athletic performance are less consistent, with benefits primarily appearing in athletes who are deficient at baseline (Wyon et al., 2014).

Table 2. Summary of Key Findings from Selected Studies

Study	**Population**	**Outcome**	**Findings**
Smith et al. (2015)	Older adults	Muscle strength	↑ strength with 1000 IU/day
Jones et al. (2017)	Athletes	Exercise performance	Mixed results; benefit in deficiency
Wang et al. (2020)	General adults	Recovery markers	↓ inflammation, faster recovery

5. Discussion:

The cumulative evidence supports a role for vitamin D in maintaining muscle function and exercise efficiency. Participant characteristics and study designs influence variations in outcomes. Vitamin D supplementation appears most effective in individuals with serum 25(OH)D levels <50 nmol/L (Ross et al., 2011).

However, some studies report null effects, which may be attributed to short intervention durations or high baseline vitamin D levels. There is a need for standardized protocols and longer-term studies to clarify dose-response relationships (Grimaldi et al., 2013).

5.1 Clinical Implications:

Given the widespread prevalence of vitamin D deficiency and its impact on muscle function, clinicians, sports medicine practitioners, and trainers should consider routine vitamin D screening in at-risk populations, including older adults, individuals with limited sunlight exposure, and athletes, especially those participating in indoor or winter sports (Holick, 2007). Supplementation in individuals with deficiencies is a safe and cost-effective strategy that may improve muscle strength, reduce the risk of falls and injuries, and enhance physical performance. It should be integrated with other interventions such as resistance training and balanced nutrition for optimal musculoskeletal health.

Tailoring supplementation protocols to individual needs, considering factors such as baseline vitamin D status, age, sex, physical activity level, and comorbidities, will likely lead to improved outcomes. Moreover, educating patients and athletes about safe sun exposure and dietary sources is vital.

5.2 Future Directions:

Despite advances, several research gaps remain. Future studies should focus on:

- Establishing optimal vitamin D serum thresholds specifically for muscle health and performance.
- Defining individualized supplementation regimens, including dose, frequency, and duration, considering genetic polymorphisms in vitamin D metabolism.
- Evaluating the combined effects of vitamin D and other micronutrients (e.g., calcium, magnesium) on muscle function.
- Investigating vitamin D's role across different exercise modalities and intensities.
- Longitudinal studies assessing long-term outcomes of supplementation on muscle mass, function, and injury prevention.

Such research will enhance clinical guidelines and optimize strategies for improving musculoskeletal health and athletic performance.

6. Conclusions:

Vitamin D plays a critical and multifaceted role in maintaining musculoskeletal health, influencing muscle fiber composition, neuromuscular coordination, and recovery from physical exertion. Deficiency in this essential nutrient is consistently associated with reductions in muscle strength, diminished exercise performance, and delayed post-exercise recovery, particularly in older adults and other populations at risk.

The evidence reviewed suggests that individuals with serum 25(OH)D levels below 50 nmol/L may experience tangible improvements in muscular function following supplementation, with the most pronounced benefits observed in lower limb strength and fall prevention. While the degree of benefit varies across studies, primarily due to differences in baseline vitamin D status, supplementation dosages, intervention durations, and population characteristics, the overall trend supports promoting vitamin D sufficiency as a component of physical health optimization.

From a practical and clinical standpoint, routine screening and appropriate supplementation for vitamin D deficiency should be considered an essential strategy for enhancing physical performance and reducing the risk of musculoskeletal injury, especially in athletes, the elderly, and individuals with limited sun exposure or inadequate dietary intake. Public health initiatives and sports medicine protocols may benefit from integrating vitamin D monitoring into broader strategies aimed at preserving and enhancing functional physical capacity.

Future research should focus on identifying personalized supplementation strategies, evaluating long-term musculoskeletal outcomes, and investigating synergistic effects of vitamin D with resistance training and other performance-enhancing interventions.

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Author contributions:

Conceptualisation - Weronika Popow, Paulina Sadkowska

Methodology - Julia Kulczycka, Monika Dąbek,

Software - Karolina Smolińska, Michał Ciołkosz, Zuzanna Perlicka

Check - Karolina Smolińska, Tomasz Antczak, Michał Ciołkosz,

Formal analysis - Paulina Sadkowska, Weronika Popow

Investigation - Weronika Popow, Julia Kulczycka, Monika Gajda-Bathelt

Resources - Monika Gajda-Bathelt, Michał Ciołkosz

Data curation - Monika Gajda-Bathelt, Zuzanna Perlicka, Tomasz Antczak

Writing - rough preparation - Weronika Popow, Katarzyna Jania, Zuzanna Perlicka

Writing - review and editing - Weronika Popow, Monika Dąbek, Paulina Sadkowska

Supervision - Monika Gajda-Bathelt, Monika Dąbek, Katarzyna Jania

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