Children need to be out in the sun often

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KUALA LUMPUR: Children need to play and exercise more under the sun, said Universiti Putra Malaysia nutrition and dietetics department head, Associate Professor Dr Zalilah Mohd Shariff.

Addressing researchers and dietitians at the GlaxoSmithKline symposium on “Vitamin D Insufficiency In Malaysian School Children” yesterday, she said: “This is the best and easiest way for children to get their dose of the sunshine vitamin.

“Studies have shown that many children with vitamin D deficiency do not get enough sun exposure because parents are worried that their children will be exposed to air pollutants and harmful rays that could cause skin cancer. This misconception needs to be changed.

“The recommended sun exposure is just 10 to 15 minutes, three to five times a week,” she said adding that 70 per cent of primary school students are vitamin D deficient.

Zalilah added that although students spend an hour a week for physical exercise in school, most of the activities were conducted under the shade.

“I have seen teachers conducting lessons under a tree or in the hall.

“‘There are even some who would give directions to their students while holding an umbrella,” she claimed.

Zalilah said vitamin D does not only reduce the risk of rickets, cancer, diabetes mellitus and hypertension, it also helps boost the immune system to fight against fever and flu.

According to Universiti Malaya paediatric endocrinologist Dr Muhammad Yazid Jalaludin, groups at risk of deficiency include pregnant women, mothers who breastfeed and obese children.

He said a preliminary study done by the University Malaya Medical Centre showed that 60 per cent of pregnant women in the third trimester suffered from vitamin D deficiency.

He said children and adults needed 400 units of vitamin D daily. Vitamin D content is high in salmon, sardines, mackerel, tuna, cod liver oil, egg yolk and fortified foods like milk, bread and cheese.