Could age-old scourge of rickets return as our kids are starved of sunlight?

IT’S D-DAY, BABY

OUR modern lifestyle of excessive screen time, sun-smart awareness and a more multicultural Australia could be causing the re-emergence of rickets among our babies, pregnant women and nursing mums.

To help find out, a South Australian-first study will test the vitamin D levels of infants and mums to see if supplements are needed to reduce the risk of bone diseases among babies.

“We certainly do see children who have bone issues because of low vitamin D levels,” Women’s and Children’s Health Network senior dietitian Dr Merryn Netting said.

While there are no official South Australian figures, a 2012 national study estimated five out of every 100,000 Australian children under 15 years had vitamin D deficiency rickets – a preventable bone disorder more common in the Middle East, Africa and Asia. The study described vitamin D deficiency rickets as a re-emerging and major public health issue in Australia, especially among migrants and refugees.

High risk factors for infants and children include those with dark skin and who have limited sunlight exposure, and infants of mothers with vitamin D deficiency, particularly those who are exclusively breastfeeding.

Dr Netting, also principal investigator at the SA Health and Medical Research Institute, is calling on 100 babies aged four to six months and their mums to be involved in the study before the end of spring.

“In the past, babies got vitamin D from the sun but we now know that exposing infants and young children during their first year can increase their chance of getting skin cancer later on,” Dr Netting said.

“Vitamin D is essential for developing strong bones, but it’s hard for
babies to obtain enough from the food they eat.

“It’s a catch-22 for mothers, because while it’s recommended that new babies are breastfed exclusively up until six months old, breast milk is usually a poor source of vitamin D.”

Burnside mum Fen Bennett said the re-emergence of vitamin D deficiencies among infants was “not surprising”.

She said balancing the risk of skin cancer from too much sun exposure while maintaining adequate vitamin D levels could be difficult.

Mrs Bennett and her nine-week-old baby Alannah will be part of the SA trial. Although tested with adequate vitamin D levels, Mrs Bennett’s Asian background places her at higher risk of deficiency.

TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY
CALL 8161 7512 OR EMAIL
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FROM SUN KICKS TO SUN SMART

■ In the 1960s, mothers were encouraged to give their babies daily “sun kicks” by placing them undressed outside for 45 minutes.

■ The best natural source for vitamin D is the sun’s UV radiation.

■ Lack of vitamin D can cause rickets, a bone disorder causing delayed growth, bow legs and weakness/pain in spine, pelvis and legs.

■ High risk: people with dark skin, people who cover up for health or religious reasons, people who are mostly indoors.

■ Vitamin D is a hormone that controls calcium levels in the blood.