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Vitamin A is a generic terminology used for a large group of similar compounds which include retinol, retinal and four carotenoids including beta carotene. Preformed vitamin A usually includes retinol which is an alcohol and retinal which is chemically an aldehyde. The term retinoid usually refers to three related compounds; retinol, retinal and retinoic acid. Retinoic acid, a form of vitamin A known to effect gene transcription is formed by the conversion of retinal by the body. Pro vitamin A carotenoids refers to beta carotenes and other carotenoids which can be converted into retinol.

Free retinol is generally not found in foods however precursor and storage forms of retinol is found in food from animals. Carotenoids can be obtained from plant sources especially yellow, green and orange vegetables; some of these carotenoids can be precursors of vitamin A. Rich sources of beta carotene are sweet potato, carrots, pumpkins, cantaloupe, broccoli, apricots, and spinach and collard greens. Beef liver, egg yolk, cheddar cheese and fortified milk are excellent sources of vitamin A.

This vitamin is important to maintain healthy teeth, skin, mucous membranes, skeletal and soft tissues and also promotes good vision especially in low light.

Retina is located at the back of the eye and senses the light when it passes through the lens and converts it into a nerve impulse for the interpretation by the brain. Retinol, which is transported to retina via circulation and get stored, converts into visual pigments by series of reactions. These pigments are able to detect very small amount of light and hence become important for night vision. So unavailability of retinol to retina may result in impaired dark adaptation, the condition known as night blindness.

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Vitamin is also known as anti-infective vitamin as it has an important role in maintaining the normal functioning of the immune system. Retinol is responsible for maintaining the integrity of the skin and the mucosal cells which line the airways, alimentary canal and urinary tract and act the body's first line mechanism against infection. Vitamin A and retinoic acid are required for the differentiation of white blood cells which are defense cells of the body.

It is a crucial for growth of the developing fetus as its excess or deficiency can cause birth defects. It regulates gene expression for growth hormone and functions in the development of limb, heart, eyes and ears in the fetus.

Stem cells of red blood cells are also dependent on retinoid for their differentiation and maturation. Vitamin A also mobilizes iron from storage sites and incorporates them into developing red cells needed for hemoglobin formation, the carrier of oxygen in blood cells.

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