



Sue Ann Says: No Bones About it: Osteoporosis Needs our Attention

Women don't seem too concerned about osteoporosis. Maybe because we think it's something we don't have to worry about until we're elderly. Perhaps we think it's an inevitable part of aging. Conversely, it may be that universal sense of denial: it's not going to happen to us.

We do need to be concerned about osteoporosis – very concerned. Osteoporosis, literally “porous bone,” causes our bones to lose mass and deteriorate, making them fragile and susceptible to fractures. Osteoporosis is a major personal and public health issue. It's estimated that 1.5 million people in the U.S. suffer a bone fracture each year, resulting in direct medical costs of more than \$18 billion. The personal costs also are staggering. Fractures, especially among the elderly, result in long-term impairment, loss of independence and even death.

We need to be concerned for ourselves, our daughters and our granddaughters *right now*. We are never too old or too young to take steps that will improve our bone health.

I learned a lot about osteoporosis from Mary Beth Elliott, PharmD, PhD, Associate Professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Pharmacy, Vice-chair of the Pharmacy Practice Division there, and a clinical pharmacist at the VA Medical Center Osteoporosis Clinic. Mary Beth gave me valuable advice about how women can protect their bones and reduce their risk of fractures.

Risk factors

As with many diseases, family history is a strong risk factor for osteoporosis, so if you have first-degree relatives (parents or siblings) who had fractures as adults, you are at higher risk. Asian and non-Hispanic white women are at greater risk, as are women who are thin. Smoking significantly increases the risk of osteoporosis, as do other lifestyle factors such as physical inactivity and excessive use of alcohol. Poor nutrition makes a huge difference, and use of certain medications increases the risk. Those who have had previous fractures also are at increased risk.

But Mary Beth told me **age** is the greatest risk factor for women. Estrogen strengthens our bones and their positive response to weight-bearing activity. With the loss of estrogen following menopause, women begin to lose bone mass dramatically. In the five to seven years following menopause, Mary Beth said, women can lose up to 20 percent of their bone mass.

Girls and young women should be especially concerned with maintaining a healthy hormonal environment. Women's bodies continue to build bone mass only until about age 20 and extreme dieting and exhaustive exercise causes women to miss periods, lack vital estrogen and consequently decrease bone mass. If a young woman is not getting her periods, she should find out why.

Minimizing the risks

Here are Mary Beth's tips to prevent or minimize loss of bone mass:

- Good nutrition is essential. Calcium builds bone mass and helps maintain it in older age. Vitamin D helps our bodies absorb calcium and helps bone in other ways. We get most of our vitamin D from casual exposure to sunlight. Don't like milk? Don't worry, Mary Beth says. Each good-size serving of milk, cottage cheese, ice cream, yogurt, cheese, or calcium-enriched orange juice has about 300 mg. Older people need 1500 mg every day, younger people, about 1000 mg. Talk with your health care provider about the amount of calcium and vitamin D you need based on your age, risk factors and any other medications you are taking.
- Don't smoke. Women who smoke tend to be thinner, reach menopause earlier and are more likely to have poor circulation and emphysema, which often prevent them from participating in weight-bearing activities. Smoking can also disrupt a woman's estrogen metabolism, lowering bone density and increasing the likelihood of a fracture.
- Be physically active. Participate in weight-bearing exercise such as walking or aerobics. "Even biking and swimming, which are non-impact activities, can improve bone health because there is a connection between muscle action and bone strength," Mary Beth told me. "The goal is to exercise and get your heart rate up 30 minutes a day, at least four days a week."
- Maintain a healthy weight. Being too thin increases your risk, but being overweight stresses your joints over the long term.
- Minimize your risk of falling. If you are at risk, exercise to increase your strength and balance. Especially as we get older, and for anyone who has had falls or "near-falls" it is important to think and act about home safety. Equip your home with railings, improve bathroom safety with grab bars in the shower, remove throw rugs and take other safety measures.
- Talk with your health care provider about when you should be screened for osteoporosis. If you are at increased risk, medications and lifestyle changes can maintain or improve your bone density and reduce your risk of fractures. Remember, even "stability" or "maintenance" of bone density on your osteoporosis medication is good.
- Limit consumption of alcohol, soft drinks and coffee drinks. Heavy use of alcohol is directly bad for bones and certainly increases one's chances of falling. Moderate use of soft drinks and coffee in itself doesn't cause bone loss, but drinking lots of them can. "It's partly the milk-displacement effect," Mary Beth explained. "If you are drinking a can of soda or a cup of coffee, you're not drinking a glass of milk."

From making sure our children drink their milk to having a bone density test as we age, to doing "safety inspections" of our mom's house, we need to pay attention to osteoporosis. You can learn more about osteoporosis at our Web site, wwhf.org. Working together, women can turn the tables on osteoporosis. Because good bone health all begins with a healthy woman.

Yours in good health,

Sue Ann Thompson
Founder & President
Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation

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