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Osteoporosis: The silent disease

Tips on what you can do to protect yourself

We all know or have heard about someone — a parent, an aunt or uncle, a grandparent, or perhaps a friend — who, at an older age, accidentally fell and fractured a bone. Usually, this is due to the weakening of bones caused by osteoporosis, a disease where you lose too much bone or don't make enough. Protecting your bones and staying healthy,



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can prevent incidences such as these from happening.

Rheumatologists, physicians who treat diseases that affect the joints, muscles and bones, are experienced in detecting, preventing and treating osteoporosis, which is often referred to as a silent disease. It often goes undiagnosed and doesn't cause pain until a fracture, which may be caused by a low-impact fall.

Osteoporosis commonly affects postmenopausal women, due to the drop in estrogen. Other causes include long-term steroid use, low testosterone in men, confinement to bed, hyperactive thyroid and parathyroid disease. Additional risk factors include cigarette smoking, consuming excessive amounts of alcohol, family history of osteoporosis and a lean, thin body frame. Those with any of the previously stated factors should consider requesting a bone density test from their primary care physician.

Bone density test

A bone density test uses x-rays to measure how many grams of calcium and other minerals are packed into the segment of bone. It's used to diagnose osteoporosis, even at its early stages, allowing your doctor to introduce treatment before a bone fracture happens. Increasing calcium intake, checking and correcting vitamin D deficiency, and doing weight-bearing exercises are some of the measures that can slow the process of osteoporosis. The safest and most effective source of calcium for strong bones are calcium rich

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES can be found from The National Osteoporosis Foundation at www.nof.org, or www.healthywomen.org.

foods, such as milk, yogurt and cheese. With the help of the Fracture Risk Assessment Tool, used to evaluate fracture risk, your physician can determine if you need additional treatment or medications.

Common misconceptions

Osteoporosis is often confused with osteoarthritis, which is caused by the wear and tear of the cartilage inside joints, resulting in pain. Osteoporosis is painless and affects the bones, not joints. Osteopenia is not a separate disease, but the stage before osteoporosis, which also can be detected by performing a bone density test. It's important to detect osteopenia in order to prevent its progression to osteoporosis.

Another common misconception is that a bone density test and a bone scan are the same. A bone density test — generally recommended for all women after menopause, men 70 and older and those with certain risk factors — is used to diagnose osteoporosis. A bone scan, is commonly used to detect cancer that has spread to the bone.

More information

Yes, aging is a part of life, but osteoporosis does not have to accompany it. When diagnosed at an early stage, osteoporosis is both preventable and treatable. It's important to talk to your doctor, assess your risk factors, get a bone density test and, when necessary, determine a treatment plan. I encourage everyone to repeat this process every 2 to 3 years, and when warranted, see a rheumatologist.

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