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Osteoporosis: How it effects you
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Your skeleton is made up of living tissue. For your body to keep bones strong, it continuously breaks down older bones and replaces it with new bone. As people grow older more bone is broken down than is replaced. In many people the bone loss reaches levels that may cause the bones to be weak and at risk for fracture. Each year there will be more fractures caused by osteoporosis in women than strokes, heart attacks, and breast cancer combined. In the United States there are close to 34 million diagnosed cases of osteopenia (low bone mass) and 10 million cases of osteoporosis (more severe bone mineral loss). The staggering statistics of this health issue make it of great importance for the health industry and society as a whole.

From early development to adulthood, new bone is generated faster than it is broken down making a larger and stronger skeleton. Most people reach peak bone mass in their late 20's, with a normal level of bone loss that begins in the mid 30's. If the normal progression of bone mass moves too quickly or goes to far, the skeleton may become weak and at risk for fracture caused from minor falls or accidents. The health industry does not fully understand what causes the increased amount of bone loss, but it is known that when levels of estrogen drop after menopause, the risk of bone loss may increase dramatically.

Women are at a higher risk for osteoporosis and it is believed that 1 out of 2 will suffer a fracture caused by weakened bones in their lifetime. Although over 80% of diagnosed osteoporosis patients are women, men are still at risk. Other risk factors that may affect men or women include lack of exercise, poor diet and nutrition, smoking, alcohol use and many others. In their lifetime, 25% of men will have a fracture caused by osteoporosis.

Osteoporosis Risk Factors:

- *Family history of osteoporosis*
- *Women four times as likely as men*
- *Early menopause (surgical or natural)*
- *Prolonged use of certain medications*
- *Never having given birth*
- *Race (Caucasian or Asian)*
- *Lack of exercise*
- *Poor diet and nutrition*
- *Excessive alcohol use*
- *Smoking*
- *Previous fractures*
- *Stomach or kidney disease*
- *Excessive caffeine or salt (decreases calcium levels)*
- *Steroid use*

Some common symptoms of osteoporosis include back and neck pain, bone tenderness, loss of height, bending of the spine, and dentures that no longer fit well. After reviewing

your symptoms and risk factors for osteoporosis your doctor may recommend a bone density test. Bone density or DEXA is a special x-ray that measures the strength and mineral density of your bones. This information is used by the radiologist and your doctor to determine the health and strength of your bones as well as your risk for fracture. In many situations post menopausal women will have a DEXA scan as a screening for osteoporosis due to the fact that there is such a high risk level for the development of the disease. This works in the same way as your doctor recommending a screening mammogram to diagnose breast cancer.

DEXA scans can take as little as five minutes and can quickly and accurately diagnose your risk for fractures. If loose, metal and button free clothing is worn, you will not need to change into a gown. The DEXA machine has a padded table for you to lie on and the machine will scan your hip and lower back to diagnose the bone mineral density of your entire skeleton. The information from the scan compares your mineral density to a young, healthy adult, as well as, the bone density of adults with your age, race, and gender. The radiologist uses this and your health history to diagnose your level of bone mineral density and your risk for fracture.

The diagnosis of increased bone loss is an important first step, and early recognition can help you maintain your bone health. When osteoporosis or osteopenia is diagnosed early, it gives treatment options a better chance to work. The main goal of treatment is to control or decrease the loss of bone minerals, and in turn, strengthen your skeleton and decrease your risk for fracture. Treatments can be as simple as a change in diet and exercise. A healthy diet with daily nutrition that includes sufficient calcium and vitamin D may significantly help fight bone loss. Weight bearing exercise also can help to strengthen your bones and decrease your risk for fracture. In some cases hormone therapies or medications may be needed to combat the loss of bone minerals.

Over 55% of the population over 50 years old have osteopenia or osteoporosis in this country and over 14 billion dollars is spent annually on treatment. This is a health issue that can affect almost everyone which can be diagnosed and treated easily in most situations. It is important for everyone to know their risk for developing osteoporosis as well as their options for treatment and diagnosis. With education and public effort osteoporosis and fracture risk can be diminished and our society can live healthy and happy as they grow older.

For more information refer to the following: National Osteoporosis Foundation <http://www.nof.org/>, or contact your provider.

If you have any topics that you would like to see discussed in this column please call Maryanne at (603) 747-9189, or email maldrich@cottagehospital.org

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