

Save Your Bones - Now

By Staci Sturrock

As America ages, the incidence of osteoporosis is "skyrocketing," says the National Osteoporosis Foundation.

It's truly a public health problem, not just a cosmetic matter of dowager's humps and hunched backs. A major cause of nursing-home admissions, osteoporosis costs an estimated \$10 billion annually.

"All of us are going to have thinning of the bones - that's part of aging," says Dr. Adelaide Nardone, a private practice gynecologist in Westchester, N.Y. "Osteoporosis is a disease state" that puts sufferers at a far greater risk for fractures.

"If you're going to do something about your bones, don't wait," Nardone says. "Osteoporosis is a real issue. (Bone loss) starts even before menopause." She suggests that women start taking calcium supplements in their thirties and that all women get regular exercise to build muscles, improve flexibility and signal bones that they need to grow stronger to meet the demands placed on them.

Two types of exercise build and maintain bone mass and density, the NOF says. Weight-bearing exercise is the kind that causes your bones and muscles to work against gravity - in other words, activity in which your feet and legs bear your weight.

Walking. Climbing stairs. Dancing. Playing backyard soccer with the grandkids. (Swimming and bicycling are not weight-bearing.)

The other type is resistance exercise - activities that require muscular strength. They will improve muscle mass and strengthen bones. Lifting free weights. Using the weight machine at the gym. Carrying groceries.

And if you're already postmenopausal? "You can certainly stem the tide and prevent further deterioration," says Dr. Felicia Cosman, clinical director of the National Osteoporosis Foundation. Physicians also have in their arsenal many drugs that can improve bone mass to a moderate degree.

The current recommendation, too, is that all women 65 and older get a bone-density test if they haven't done so previously. That will give you and your doctor a better view of the status of your skeleton.

Don't panic if you're diagnosed with osteoporosis. "We've realized in the last five years that we can very effectively treat osteoporosis," Cosman says. "We don't have a cure, but we can dramatically reduce pain and fractures from the disease, even at its later stages."

A few additional facts about the disease, from the National Women's Health Information Center:

* In the five to seven years after menopause, women can lose up to 20 percent of their bone mass, placing them at increased risk for osteoporosis, the bone-thinning disease in which bones become increasingly fragile and more likely to break. If left untreated, osteoporosis can progress painlessly until a woman suddenly fractures a bone.

* Osteoporosis accounts for 70 percent of all fractures occurring each year in people over age 45.

* More than half of women over age 65 suffer from the condition, and nine out of 10 women over the age of 75 are affected by osteoporosis.

* Half of all women and one in eight men over age 50 will have an osteoporosis-related fracture in their lifetime. About 24 percent of hip-fracture patients age 50 and over die in the year following their fracture.

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