

Keeping bones healthy

The Health Column

17 Dec
2014

Looking after our bones is an important part of our health. It is important to be aware of bone health early on in life, before diseases such as osteoporosis set in.

Osteoporosis means porous bones. This chronic condition occurs when our bones lose minerals, principally calcium, and the body can't replace the minerals quickly enough to keep the bones healthy. The result is bones becoming fragile and brittle, causing them to break and crack more easily. All bones are at risk, but the most common fractures occur in the spine, hip, and wrist.



According to Osteoporosis Australia (www.osteoporosis.org.au), 7.5 million Australians have low bone density which puts them at risk of a bone fracture with serious, sometimes fatal, consequences. The message from Osteoporosis Australia is to know your bone density and stay fracture free. For more information visit the website www.howdenseareyou.org.au.

The statistics on osteoporosis are frightening. Every 5–6 minutes someone is admitted to an Australian hospital with a fracture as a result of osteoporosis. This is likely to increase to every 3–4 minutes within the next 10 years.

About 50% of people with one fracture due to osteoporosis will have another. The risk of future fractures rises with each new fracture – known as the 'cascade effect'. This 'cascade effect' means that women who have suffered a fracture in their spine are more than four times more likely to have another fracture within the next year, compared to women who have never had an osteoporotic fracture. Osteoporosis is most common in postmenopausal women.

The challenge remains in identifying these fractures. Osteoporosis often presents no symptoms until a fracture occurs, and often not diagnosed until after a person has experienced their first fracture. It is very important for anyone over >50 who experiences a fracture from a minor bump or fall, to be investigated to check if the fracture was caused by osteoporosis. It is estimated that two-thirds of fractures of the spine are not identified or treated, despite the fact they nearly all cause pain. People can mistakenly believe that the symptoms of spine fractures – back pain, height loss or rounding of the spine – are just due to 'old age'.

Fractures can lead to chronic pain, disability, loss of independence and even premature death. Therefore preventing fractures and managing bone health is a priority for our health system.

For patients diagnosed with osteoporosis, loss of bone density may have taken place over many years. It takes time to re-build bone strength. Using the right medicine, in the right way, is critical for bone health.

In Australia, medicine to treat osteoporosis has been prescribed for many years. Australians have benefited from the long-term use of osteoporosis medicines to slow bone density loss and reduce the risk of fracture. Your pharmacist is your medicines expert. Talk to your pharmacist if you have any questions or concerns about your medicine for osteoporosis, including dosage (how much), frequency (how often), mode of action (how it works), interactions with other medicines and even food!

Your local pharmacy is your health destination. Your pharmacist is there to provide advice, counselling and professional services along with dispensing prescription medicines and supplying non-prescription medicines. Speaking to your pharmacist about your medicines is a good way to ensure that you continue to get the maximum health benefits, including calcium and vitamin D supplementation, bone density testing, and non-pharmacological strategies to reduce the risk or further impact of osteoporosis.

You can get more detailed information about looking after your bones and bone health from pharmacies around Australia providing the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia's (PSA) Self Care health information, where you can pick up an *Osteoporosis* Fact Card.

For the nearest Self Care pharmacy location phone PSA on 1300 369 772, or go to www.psa.org.au 'Supporting practice' then 'Self Care', and then 'Find a Self Care pharmacy'.