

Physicians and Patients Can Both Join in the Fight Against Osteoporosis

Physiotherapy in Hamilton downtown for Osteoporosis

Hamilton Physio & Rehab came across this article that outlines treatment options for those with osteoporosis, and how a physiotherapist can make your home and regular activities safer

If you were born between 1946 and 1964, then you are one of the 75 million Baby Boomers in the United States. And when you look in the mirror you see a few wrinkles and gray hair you didn't have 20 years ago. But there's something else that you can't see and that's osteoporosis. Osteoporosis is a loss of bone density that can cause weak, brittle bones that tend to break easily. Think about this: 50 per cent of the women in this group and 30 per cent of the men will develop an osteoporosis-related fracture sometime during their older years.

Hang on -- there's a bit more you need to know. Disability and death are close companions of these fragility fractures. If you break a hip, you could end up in a nursing home, you most likely won't get back to normal, and death is a reality for one out of every five people with fragility hip fractures.

So where's the good news in all this? If you have osteoporosis, if you are at risk for osteoporosis, or if you have already suffered an osteoporosis-related fracture, there are steps you can take for a better outcome. And even better than that -- doctors are learning more and more about osteoporosis and what treatments are specific to this problem so they can help you avoid such problems. What can you expect from your physician? As the article points out, understanding who is at risk, why osteoporosis develops, and what to do to prevent (or treat) this disease should be an orthopedic surgeon's highest priority for this age group.

First, physicians recognize that menopausal women are affected most often but men should not be neglected. Men develop osteoporosis later in life than women but the effects can be just as devastating. Osteoporosis occurs when more bone cells die than are replaced by new, healthy bone cells. This process of tearing down old bone cells and building up new ones is called bone remodeling. As we age, especially with age (and for women, a loss of the hormone estrogen), bone remodeling slows down or becomes lopsided with too many old cells and not enough new ones.

That's where a prevention plan of vitamin and mineral supplementation along with exercise and lifestyle changes comes in. Start with calcium with vitamin D, getting some sun exposure (an excellent source of vitamin D), and quitting smoking (or other tobacco products). These are a good place to start. A lifestyle of daily exercise to challenge balance, build strength, and stimulate bone growth is essential from childhood when bone is forming and continuing throughout the lifespan.

Your physician will check for any hormonal abnormalities that can affect bone and prescribe medications that can restore the chemical balance within your body. Usually some blood tests are needed to check this out. If you are a candidate for osteoporosis, your doctor may prescribe antiresorptive drugs called bisphosphonates like Boniva or Fosamax, then your doctor will prescribe those for you. Your physician will also do a risk factor assessment to look for any other risk factors that might increase your chances for developing osteoporosis.

Getting older, having a family history of osteoporosis, being of the Caucasian (white) race, and having a previous history of smoking or alcohol use are nonmodifiable risks. Nothing you can do to change any of those. What you really want to focus on are the modifiable risk factors (things you can do something about). Tobacco use was already mentioned. Other modifiable risk factors include being underweight, drinking too much alcohol, being a couch potato or otherwise inactive, and not taking your calcium and vitamin D.

Your physician can also measure your bone density in order to calculate your risk of a fracture using special X-ray tests like Dual Energy X-ray Absorptiometry (DXA scan). Another useful test is the FRAX Risk Assessment Tool put out by the World Health Organization (WHO). This tool calculates your 10-year risk of fracture. You can even access this tool on-line yourself, but you'll need to enter some personal information.

your DXA scan to complete the calculations (<http://www.shef.ac.uk/FRAX>). These tests are recommended for women older, men 70 and older, and anyone over 50 who has significant risk factors for osteoporosis.

A physiotherapist can also help you. The therapist can prescribe a specific exercise program proven to help improve bone health. Exercise is good for your health, but not all exercise targets the bones. The therapist can also conduct a falls assessment to determine your risk is for a fall and then develop a falls prevention plan designed for your unique risk factors.

You can help yourself. Don't wait until you fall and break a bone. Studies show that preventive measures do make a significant difference. Ask your physician now to measure your bone density and to calculate your risk of falls and fractures. If your physician prescribes calcium and vitamin D, take them as directed! If your physician refers you to an endocrinologist (specialist in diseases of the bones), make the appointment and go! Don't put it off.

Ask your physiotherapist to inspect your home for any safety tips and ideas on how to prevent falls. And if you have a history of fragility fracture and you haven't been told any of these things about vitamins and exercise and home fall prevention plan, don't walk (don't run) to the phone right now and make yourself an appointment for some proactive help today. See your primary care physician or orthopedic surgeon for the kind of comprehensive care you'll need to keep your bones health and strong against osteoporosis, fractures, and falls that can change your life forever.

Reference: Richard M. Dell, MD, CCD, et al. Osteoporosis Disease Management: What Every Orthopaedic Surgeon Should Know. Journal of Bone and Joint Surgery. November 2009. Vol. 91-A. Suppl. 6. Pp. 79-86.

Hamilton Physio & Rehab provides services for physiotherapy in Hamilton downtown.