

May Is Osteoporosis Prevention Month

Bone Research Helps Fight Silent Disease

LOU ANN GOOD

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READING (Berks Co.) —

"Osteoporosis is a silent disease." That's the message that Dr. Ronald Emkey, director of Bone Research Center, reiterates in his many talks during the month of May, designated as Osteoporosis Prevention Month.

Osteoporosis is thinning of the bones that results in fractures, pain, and crippling posture caused by low bone mass and deterioration of bone tissue. About 25 million Americans have osteoporosis. Four out of five are women. Women are often unaware they have osteoporosis until damage is done.

Despite recent advances in the treatment and prevention of osteoporosis, research shows that 77 percent of osteoporosis goes undiagnosed and only nine percent that is diagnosed is being treated.

"This is abominable," Emkey said.

Because osteoporosis is undiagnosed and untreated in the majority of cases, every other woman 50 years and older will have a osteoporosis-related bone fracture, according to Emkey.

"More women die from complications from osteoporosis than from uterine or breast cancer. For every 100 women who have a hip fracture, 20 will die. Fifty percent of those who have a hip fracture will never fully recover," Emkey said.

It's even possible for women to have fractured vertebrae and not even be aware of it. Emkey showed slides of actual vertebrae of osteoporosis patients in which the vertebrae appeared to be only half the size of that of a healthy adult.

According to Emkey, one of the first signs of osteoporosis is an ache between the shoulder blades. Osteoporosis progressively and irreversibly weakens the bones to the point that any movement can cause a painful fracture of the hip, spine or other bones.

"The bone becomes so thin that they may break from sneezing and coughing," he said.

As far as hip fractures, the bone



"More women die from complications from osteoporosis than from uterine or breast cancer," said Dr. Ronald Emkey, director of Bone Research Center. Emkey finds it deplorable that despite recent advances in prevention and treatment of osteoporosis, 77 percent of osteoporosis goes undiagnosed and only nine percent that is diagnosed is treated.



become so brittle that it can break by just walking.

In addition to fractures, osteoporosis sufferers can experience a loss of height, severe back pain, or spinal deformities, such as stooped posture or a humped back.

Some women are more likely to develop osteoporosis than others. The highest risk group is female, slight or slender built, fair skinned, a family history of osteoporosis, low muscle mass, low bone mass at age 35, and early menopause. A hysterectomy puts women at even great risk.

"The thinner you are, the greater your risk. But I've seen 300-pound women who also have osteoporosis," Emkey said.

Risk is even greater for women with a sedentary lifestyle, low calcium intake, cigarette smoking, and increased intakes of protein, alcohol, fiber, and caffeine.

"For every drag of a cigarette, you lose a little calcium. Second hand smoke also depletes calcium supply," Emkey said.

Fiber, while touted to prevent colon cancer, binds calcium, and causes calcium intake to move out of the body before being absorbed.

Emkey is concerned that many young girls are not eating enough calcium-rich foods. "We are seeing girls in their 20s with osteoporosis," he said of the dangers of a low-calcium diet during "peak bone mass" years. Studies predict that the incident of fractures from osteoporosis will double the the year 2050 because of so many young girls not consuming enough

calcium.

"You can't take too much calcium. The recommended amount of calcium is 1,500 mg daily for post-menopausal women. After the age of 50, people should take calcium with Vitamin D because the body does not absorb it well if Vitamin D is not taken.

"Osteoporosis can be prevented," Emkey said. He stresses that every woman above 50 years of age should have a bone density test.

Unfortunately many doctors do not authorize the test and many health plans do not cover it.

If you are diagnosed with osteoporosis, it can be treated to prevent additional bone loss. Your doctor can prescribe a diet and exercise program tailored to your needs. Several medications such as estrogen, alendronate, and calcitonin can prevent further bone loss. Additional therapies are also being researched.

Emkey founded the Bone Research Center located at the The Reading Hospital and Medical Center in 1990. The center is a national leader in researching the prevention and treatment of osteoporosis.

The privately-funded center uses volunteers to participate in clinical studies of new drugs that stop the devastating effects of osteoporosis.

Bone density tests are available free to women who participate in a clinical research study conducted by Emkey.

The study compares the effects

of several different types of estrogens in preventing bone loss compared with a control group taking a placebo.

Participants must be post-menopausal and in relatively good health. Age is not a deterrent. Emkey said participants range from 35 to 90 years of age.

The screening process includes a thorough physical examination, free of charge. The exam includes an electrocardiogram, mammogram, blood and urine specimens, back and bone density (DXA) X-ray scans of the lower spine, hip and whole body. In addition a gynecologist will give a breast examination, pelvic examination, a Pap smear test, and a transvaginal ultrasound.

Participants are needed for ongoing research. Participants are reimbursed for travel expenses to the center. In addition, they receive free medication and calcium supplements.

Emkey is especially interested in comparing the bones of women from a dairy background, who have probably consumed calcium-rich dairy products for years compared to women from nonfarm backgrounds. People who are predisposed to getting osteoporosis or those who already have osteoporosis are also needed for the study.

The center is also studying estrogen preparations and drugs that prevent and treat breast cancer.

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