

Osteoporosis — PREVENTION *is the best* WEAPON

When Joyce Libonati and her husband Michael decided to spend their golden years in southern Ocean County, the couple had no intention of slowing down! They can often be found walking or riding their bikes throughout their Heritage Point neighborhood, or keeping up with their young grandchildren at the beach or at Barnegat Bay.

“I consider myself pretty healthy,” exclaimed Joyce, 64, who moved here from Harrison in northern New Jersey. “And I intend to stay that way!”

Indeed, one of the first things she did upon her arrival last year was to schedule an appointment for a bone densitometry, a screening test that can detect osteoporosis in its earliest stages. She also sought out the care of a gynecologist, Dr. Joseph Miller, who is on the medical staff at SOCH.

“Bone densitometry is a painless, non-invasive test that uses small amounts of radiation to determine the bone density of the spine, hip or wrist,” explained Dr. Miller. “Normal x-rays are not sensitive enough to detect bone loss until at least 30% of bone mass has been lost. The results are compared with the average bone density of healthy young adults who are at the peak of their

bone mass. If osteoporosis is diagnosed, then I determine what lifestyle changes or treatment measures should be taken.”

In Joyce’s case, the diagnosis came back as osteopenia, a condition marked by mild thinning of the bone mass, but not as severe as osteoporosis. According to Dr. Miller, osteopenia is generally considered the first step along the road to osteoporosis,

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so it is important at this stage to take preventive measures to stave off the devastating effects of a condition that causes bones to become fragile and more prone to fractures.

“A minor fall or injury that normally would not cause a bone fracture would have the opposite effect in someone with osteoporosis,” said Dr. Miller. “The bones become brittle and weak enough to cause wrist or hip fractures, or compression fractures in the spine.”

According to Dr. Miller, osteoporosis can take quite a heavy toll on a woman’s overall health and quality of life. For example, a hip fracture will usually require surgery, followed by a long rehabilitation and a decreased ability to walk. This disability might require the patient

Food That Can Add Calcium To Your Diet

- Milk and dishes made with milk, such as puddings and soups (choose lower fat, lower cholesterol foods most often, such as skim milk)
- Cheeses, such as mozzarella, cheddar, swiss and parmesan
- Yogurt
- Canned fish with soft bones, such as sardines, anchovies and salmon
- Dark-green, leafy vegetables, such as kale, mustard greens, turnip greens and spinach
- Tofu, if processed with calcium sulfate (Read the labels)
- Tortillas made from lime-processed corn (Read the labels)

Dr. Miller’s recommended calcium intake:

- *Women between the ages of 11 and 24 –*
1,200 to 1,500 milligrams a day
- *Women who are pregnant or breast-feeding –*
1,200 to 1,500 milligrams a day
- *Women between the ages of 25 and the onset of menopause –*
1,000 milligrams a day
- *Post-menopausal women –*
1,500 milligrams a day



Joseph Miller, DO
OB/GYN at SOCH





to need additional care in the home, or, in more severe cases, could lead to a need for nursing home care.

Osteoporosis is also the cause for a condition known as kyphosis, which is characterized by the familiar, hunched over position that plagues some older people. In addition, bone fractures are responsible for considerable pain, lost workdays, and the inability to perform routine, daily tasks.

The good news is, it is never too early to lay the framework for osteoporosis prevention.

“I start counseling my patients in their adolescent years about getting enough calcium in their diet,” said Dr. Miller. “Calcium is an essential mineral for maintaining healthy, strong bones. If you are not consuming enough calcium, your body will take it from the bones to get the calcium it needs to maintain normal blood levels.”

I suggest that women try to get at least half their calcium through diet and the remaining through supplements. (See the sidebar in this article for a listing of calcium-rich foods.)

According to Dr. Miller, post-menopausal women are at the highest risk for developing osteoporosis. This is due to a loss in estrogen, a hormone that is important in maintaining bone density in women. When estrogen levels drop after menopause, bone loss accelerates. In fact, during the first five to ten years after menopause, women can suffer a loss of up to two to four percent of bone density per year.

“In addition to calcium, I recommend that post-menopausal women take a vitamin D supplement. Vitamin D helps the intestinal tract absorb calcium so it can get into the bones. Our skin makes vitamin D when we are exposed to sunlight, so it’s especially important for people who don’t get out in the sun to get enough vitamin D,” said Dr. Miller.

Risk Factors For Developing Osteoporosis

- Female gender
- Caucasian or Asian race
- Thin and small body frame
- Family history of osteoporosis
- Personal history of fracture as an adult
- Cigarette smoking
- Excessive alcohol consumption
- Lack of exercise
- Diet low in calcium
- Vitamin D deficiency

Lifestyle changes such as quitting smoking and curtailing alcohol use can also help prevent osteoporosis. Regular weight bearing exercise, such as low-impact aerobics, walking, jogging, tennis, and golf can help maintain bone mass and muscle flexibility. Patients should consult with their doctor before starting any type of exercise program.

There are also a number of prescription medications that stop bone loss and increase bone strength. Each carry significant benefits and slight risks. It’s important to talk to your doctor to find out if these medications are right for you.

Hormone replacement can slow or prevent postmenopausal bone loss, reduce the risk of fractures, but it is controversial and should be discussed with your doctor.

As for Joyce Libonati, she takes Dr. Miller’s recommendations seriously. She never misses her daily dose of calcium, makes sure to eat healthy and exercise, and faithfully schedules her annual exam with Dr. Miller. “I tell all of my friends they should see a gynecologist regularly and they should get a bone densitometry,” said Joyce. “It’s important for women to know if they are at risk for osteoporosis so that they can take control of their health and lead wonderful, active lives.”

After getting a referral from your doctor, you can schedule a bone densitometry test by calling SOCHConnect at 609-978-3400.

For referral to a *physician*, call SOCHConnect at 609-978-3400.