

Osteoporosis: Men – the Forgotten Sex

When was the last time one of the guys at the racquetball club asked you what your bone density was? Did you know that just as many men as women will die this year from a hip fracture? Did you know that incidence of osteoporosis takes off like a rocket starting at age 60 in women and age 65 in men? Did you know that the most commonly used drug to treat osteoporosis in females is also approved for use in males? Did you know the overwhelming majority of insurance companies still do not pay for routine screening for osteoporosis in men? Men have historically been ignored when the issue of osteoporosis is discussed. For years medical conferences concerning osteoporosis focused exclusively on women. There are reasons for this, but, as time passes, and we gain more experience in the detection and treatment of osteoporosis, men are finding they will have their day. Let's look at a little history.

In the mid 1990's we had a convergence of two significant breakthroughs. We had the release of the first highly successful drug for osteoporosis, Fosamax. We also saw the release, simultaneously, of a commercially available, accurate, easy to use, low dose x-ray machine (one four hundredth the x-ray dose of a mammogram) the "DEXA" scanner. When the ability to treat collided with the ability to detect, we witnessed an explosion in the field of osteoporosis. Thousands of DEXA scanners sprouted up across the country. The Federal government further fueled this explosion with the "Bone Mass Measurement Act." This Act mandated that insurance companies to pay for DEXA scanning. The wording of the Act was interpreted by insurance companies to only mandate reimbursement for DEXA scanning in females. Millions of women underwent scanning. When osteoporosis was detected, they received treatment. Family Practitioners, Internists, Gynecologists, Endocrinologists, Rheumatologists, Nephrologists (kidney specialists), Orthopaedic doctors and anyone else with an interest in women's health or disorders of the skeleton, found themselves ordering DEXA scans. Now, eight years has passed since the osteoporosis explosion. We have almost 20 DEXA scanners in full swing in the Capital District alone. But, there is something missing from the appointment schedules for these DEXA scanners: MEN.

In spite of the fact just as many men are dying each year from osteoporotic hip fractures as women, men are not being screened for osteoporosis. Osteoporosis in men is presently undetected, and, untreated.

There have been hundreds of medical studies since the early 90's published on the detection and treatment of osteoporosis in women. But, only recently, have researchers turned their attention to osteoporosis in men. Due to positions taken by the World Health Organization, and the younger age at which women develop osteoporosis than men, all interest initially was concentrated on post-menopausal females. It seemed it was a disease limited to women. But now, we have a convergence of several factors that are turning our attention to men.

Firstly, we now have FDA approved treatment for male osteoporosis – the same drug as for women – Fosamax. A landmark study, published in the New England Journal of Medicine two years ago showed the same drug that was successful in treating osteoporosis in women – Fosamax – worked just as well in men. Secondly, it became clear that the calcium and vitamin D requirements to prevent osteoporosis in men are the same as those for women. For instance, men also can take the very popular chewable caramel – Viactiv – which supplies all the Vitamin D and calcium necessary, or take any of the other popular calcium sources, like Tums. We already have the widespread availability of DEXA scanners. And now, two crucial ingredients are about to be added. 1) Respected international societies are beginning to publish recommendations that men undergo screening for osteoporosis. In the fall of 2002 the International Society for Clinical Densitometry (one of the largest international organizations dedicated to the detection of osteoporosis) published a position statement that recommended screening for osteoporosis for all males. 2) A large local HMO has just approved DEXA scanning for osteoporosis screening in males. We have a re-creation of the osteoporosis explosion of the mid 90's: The convergence of detection, treatment, insurance money and a new standard of care that recognizes screening for osteoporosis in males.

Osteoporosis screening for males should start at age 65. So, gentlemen, when you are old enough to get a routine flu shot, or get that Medicare

card, it will also be time to talk to your doctor about osteoporosis screening.

Osteoporosis must be detected and treated before it results in devastating spine and hip fractures. Almost one third of men who suffer a hip fracture die within one year due to complications directly related to the fracture. Of those who survive, half move into a nursing home or relative's home. With timely detection and treatment, osteoporotic fractures in men should be preventable. With the convergence of detection, treatment, insurance company reimbursement and a new standard of care it is doubtful men will be the forgotten sex much longer.

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