



Osteoporosis — not just an old person's disease

A young woman's battle with brittle bones

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At age 24, I started having acute back pain. About a month later, a sudden push caused me to slip and fall on my back. The pain was unbearable, and I couldn't move. I was crying uncontrollably and thought I was paralyzed. At the hospital, my X-rays showed multiple compression fractures of the spine like those seen in an elderly woman with severe spinal osteoporosis. The doctors were shocked. A bone density test revealed osteoporosis in both my spine and my femur area. There were four new fractures in my thoracic spine as well as several older healing fractures.

I had already consulted a few physicians about my chronic back pain but had been told the pain was due to improper body mechanics. The apparent risk factors I had for osteoporosis were ignored, probably owing to my young age — after all, osteoporosis is usually associated with much older women.

But, in fact, I have a strong family history of osteoporosis; both my parents have it. My mom has had a fracture in her right wrist. I also have a petite body frame and was quite thin at the time of my fractures. In my adolescent years, my calcium intake was poor because I had difficulty tolerating dairy products. Our culture at that time did not focus on being physically active but instead focused on having lots of low-calorie calcium-depleting tea and coffee. I was also very weight-conscious and wanted to have a model's body. Healthy eating was not a priority. All of the aforementioned risk factors were preventing me from attaining my peak bone mass.

After a prolonged recovery with agonizing pain, I decided to take a proactive role in my health and also teach others the lessons I have so painfully learned. I have realized there is nothing more important at any age than quality of life. In order to improve my bone health, I made a total lifestyle change. I have milk, yogourt, cheese and a calcium/vitamin D supplement daily. My daily

coffee consumption has decreased from five cups of regular coffee to two cups of decaffeinated. I totally refrain from drinking alcoholic beverages and smoking. I lift weights and do Zumba fitness, a dance-oriented workout program, to preserve and build my bones.

I must refrain from heavy lifting and need help with household chores. I am now very conscious of proper postural techniques such as bending and sitting properly. I had always had very poor posture and was bending incorrectly and getting out of bed the wrong way, which made my pain worse.

Today, I am very firm with my children about building up their bone "accounts" at a young age. I emphasize to my daughter, 11, and my son, seven, that if they look after their bodies now, they won't have to suffer the pain and the limitations I do. I tell them that drinking their milk and being active is like putting lots of money in their piggy banks. When they want to buy a special toy, they will have the money. If they put lots of calcium in their bone accounts, when their bodies need extra calcium, it will be there. Otherwise, it will be stolen from their bones.

One positive aspect of my experience is that I learned to cook. I spend quality time with my children cooking and baking and teaching them about eating healthy home-cooked meals and maintaining healthy body weights.

As an advocate for this disease, I want the public to be aware that osteoporosis is not just an old person's condition and need not be part of the natural aging process. Osteoporosis is a multifactorial disease that can happen to anyone regardless of age, gender or ethnic background. We all need to be proactive — from the medical community to patients, to the general population. For me, it is too late: I will forever feel the effects of spinal fractures. However, if, through my story, I can inspire even one person and make a difference in her life, it will be a reward that I will hold truly priceless.



The osteoporosis burden

- Almost two million Canadians are living with osteoporosis.
- Osteoporosis can strike at any age, but after age 50, one in four women and at least one in eight men has osteoporosis.
- The cost to the Canadian health-care system of treating osteoporosis and the fractures it causes is currently estimated to be \$1.9 billion annually.
- Osteoporotic hip fractures consume more hospital-bed days than strokes, heart attacks or diabetes.
- A woman's lifetime risk of hip fracture is greater (one in six) than her lifetime risk of developing breast cancer (one in nine).
- Both hip and spinal fractures are associated with an increased risk of death.

— For more information, go to www.osteoporosis.ca or call 1-800-463-6842.