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Partnership HealthPlan of California
(707) 989-0034
press@partnershiphp.org
Contact: Dustin Lyda

Your Partner in Health: **Hard Facts About Osteoporosis**

By Lisa Ward, M.D.

Osteoporosis is a disease that causes bone fragility and increases the risk of fractures. Broken bones caused by osteoporosis are a leading cause of disability among older adults in the U.S., resulting in the loss of independence, chronic pain, institutionalization, and death.

One of the most common locations for an osteoporotic fracture is the hip. While the overall risk of death increases after a hip fracture, there are also risks to one's quality of life. This includes the risk of being unable to return to the previous level of physical function or even requiring a stay at a long-term care facility. The cost of caring for people with osteoporotic fractures is only expected to increase as more people live into their 70s and 80s.

Bone density, also known as bone mineral density (BMD), measures the amount of minerals, like calcium and phosphate, in the structure of the bone. As we age, BMD declines, leaving our bones more susceptible to fractures. Screening to ensure adequate bone density is recommended to reduce the risk of catastrophic fractures.

The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force and the American Academy of Family Physicians recommend screening for two key groups: all women aged 65 years and older, and postmenopausal women younger than 65 who have an increased fracture risk. While routine screening is not widely recommended for men, the Bone Health and Osteoporosis Foundation advise testing men aged 75 years and older, or younger men with significant risk factors.

It is important for primary care providers to screen patients for factors associated with fracture risk. Exam findings that elevate concern for osteoporosis include a "hunched" upper back as a

sign of vertebral fractures. Some commonly used medications, such as corticosteroids, chemotherapy, and seizure medications, are associated with disruptions to bone metabolism. Some illnesses can make people more prone to osteoporosis including malabsorption from bariatric surgery as well as inflammatory gastrointestinal disorders such as Celiac Disease, Crohn's, or Ulcerative Colitis. People with illnesses that require treatment with corticosteroids, including chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, asthma, or rheumatoid arthritis, are also at an increased risk. Endocrine disorders, such as thyroid disease or parathyroid disease, also impact calcium absorption and, therefore, bone density. Collecting a thorough history of medication use, past medical and surgical history, and a social history that explores a person's habits will help identify those who may benefit from screening.

There are three approaches to the treatment of osteoporosis: medication, lifestyle changes, and risk factor modification. Providers may recommend medications, like bisphosphonates, to treat osteoporosis and slow the resorption rate of the bone. Lifestyle changes, such as eating a diet high in calcium and vitamin D or supplementation, may slow the loss of bone density and prevent the progression of osteopenia (reduced bone density) or osteoporosis. Because risk of fracture is elevated from smoking and alcohol consumption, the risk of osteoporosis can be modified with reduction or cessation of these products. Exercise, especially weightlifting, is a habit that can protect against osteoporosis. The prevention and treatment of osteoporosis is a life-extending achievement.

Dr. Lisa Ward is a regional medical director at Partnership HealthPlan of California.

About Partnership HealthPlan of California: Partnership is a community-based, safety-net health care organization that contracts with the state to administer Medi-Cal benefits. Partnership provides quality care to over 900,000 Medi-Cal members. Starting in Solano County in 1994, Partnership now serves 24 Northern California counties – Butte, Colusa, Del Norte, Glenn, Humboldt, Lake, Lassen, Marin, Mendocino, Modoc, Napa, Nevada, Placer, Plumas, Shasta, Sierra, Siskiyou, Solano, Sonoma, Sutter, Tehama, Trinity, Yolo, and Yuba. Learn more about Partnership at PartnershipHP.org.

About *Your Partner in Health*: Partnership will be sharing quarterly articles on important health topics with media outlets in our service area to help our members and communities be healthy.