

Improving Bone Health

You are never too old or too young to improve your bone health. Americans of all ages can have strong bones and live longer, healthier lives with healthful nutrition, daily physical activity, and regular medical check-ups and screenings. Dietetics professionals, as members of the health care team, have a critical role to play in helping their patients maintain strong, healthy bones throughout life. In 2005, I designated May as Bone Health Month and in May 2006, I challenge all health care professionals to continue to be proactive in evaluating potential risk factors for bone disease and promoting bone-healthy behaviors in their patients.

Osteoporosis isn't just your grandmother's disease. Thirty years ago, doctors thought weak bones and osteoporosis were a natural part of aging, but today we know that we can do something about them. One of the most dangerous myths about osteoporosis is that only women need to worry about bone health. In reality, osteoporosis affects men and women of all races, and while bone weakness manifests in older Americans, strong bones begin in childhood.

We all need to take better care of our bones. By 2020, half of all American citizens older than 50 will be at risk for fractures from osteoporosis and low bone mass if no immediate action is taken. Ten million Americans over the age of 50 currently have osteoporosis, the most common bone disease. Another 34 million are at risk for developing osteoporosis. Each year, roughly 1.5 million people suffer a bone fracture related to osteoporosis.

Unfortunately, bone health is an often-overlooked aspect of health. According to the National Osteoporosis Foundation, a woman's risk of hip fracture equals her combined risk of breast, uterine, and ovarian cancer. While many Americans are knowledgeable about and take steps to prevent heart disease and cancer, osteo-



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porosis continues to be a silent disease because bone loss occurs without symptoms. Many Americans are unaware that their bone health is in jeopardy.

In recognition of the importance of promoting bone health, on March 21, 2002, President George W. Bush proclaimed the years 2002 to 2011 as the *Decade of the Bone and Joint*. With this designation, our country has joined with other nations throughout the world in committing resources to hasten progress in a variety of areas related to the musculoskeletal system, including bone disease and arthritis.

The first-ever Surgeon General's Report on Bone Health and Osteoporosis is an integral part of the United States' overall strategy to increase the quality and years of healthful life. It brings together for the first time the scientific evidence related to the prevention, assessment, diagnosis, and treatment of bone disease. More importantly, it provides a framework for moving forward. Scientists have collected a significant amount of knowledge about bone health. Our challenge is to transfer this knowledge from the research laboratories to the general public.

Specific steps that health care professionals can take to keep America's bones strong are outlined in the Report. I urge all dietetics professionals to become familiar with these action steps to help identify and counsel individuals at risk.

As nutrition experts, dietetics professionals should take the lead in assessing patients' diet and lifestyle behaviors that affect bone health. Assessing calcium and vitamin D intake, physical activity, and adverse behaviors such as smoking and excess alcohol intake should be a routine part of health care for all patients.

Dietetics professionals can make the most impact in this national effort by encouraging Americans to eat a healthful balance of nutritious foods. Data from the US Department of Agriculture indicate that many Americans are not eating the recommended daily servings of calcium-rich dairy products and that as we grow older, consumption of dairy products decreases even further. This, coupled with the increased requirement for calcium and vitamin D in seniors, is a clear message to nutrition and health professionals that we must do more to educate our patients about healthful eating for all ages.

Since my first day as Surgeon General I've worked to develop more effective ways to communicate scientific findings to the American public. I urge you to read the scientific Report and the People's Piece, *The 2004 Surgeon General's Report on Bone Health and Osteoporosis: What it Means to You*. The report is available at <http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/library/bone-health/>.

Use your skills as educators and counselors to help your patients and loved ones understand the importance of a lifetime of healthful eating and bone-healthy behavior. Working together, we can change the picture of aging in America. Remember, you are never too old or too young to improve your bone health.

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doi: 10.1016/j.jada.2006.03.019