



Nutrition for healthy bones

Good diet along with exercise helps fend off bone-weakening osteoporosis.

by Wendy Borody

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Almost two million Canadians live with osteoporosis, a condition that weakens bones and makes them more likely to break. It is often referred to as the “silent thief” because bone loss may occur without any symptoms. People with strong bones are at an advantage because there is a natural depletion that occurs with aging and menopause. In the February issue of Lifestyles 55+, this column looked at the important role exercise plays in bone health. There is another key component in ensuring healthy bones: nutrition.

A well-balanced diet that includes adequate amounts of calcium and vitamin D is essential for building and maintaining strong bones. In fact, 99 per cent of the body’s calcium is stored in the bones. Think of the bones as a bank account for calcium storage: if the diet is inadequate, the body will withdraw the calcium it needs from the bones. When the withdrawals are greater than the deposits, the bones thin and weaken.

Add a pill

The amount of calcium the body requires is related to age. The current calcium recommendation for adults over age 50 is 1,500 milligrams per day. The best way to this calcium is through diet, and Canada’s Food Guide recommends three servings of milk or milk products daily. One serving may consist of items such as eight ounces of milk, three-quarters of a cup of yogurt, 1.5 ounces of cheese or eight ounces of a calcium-

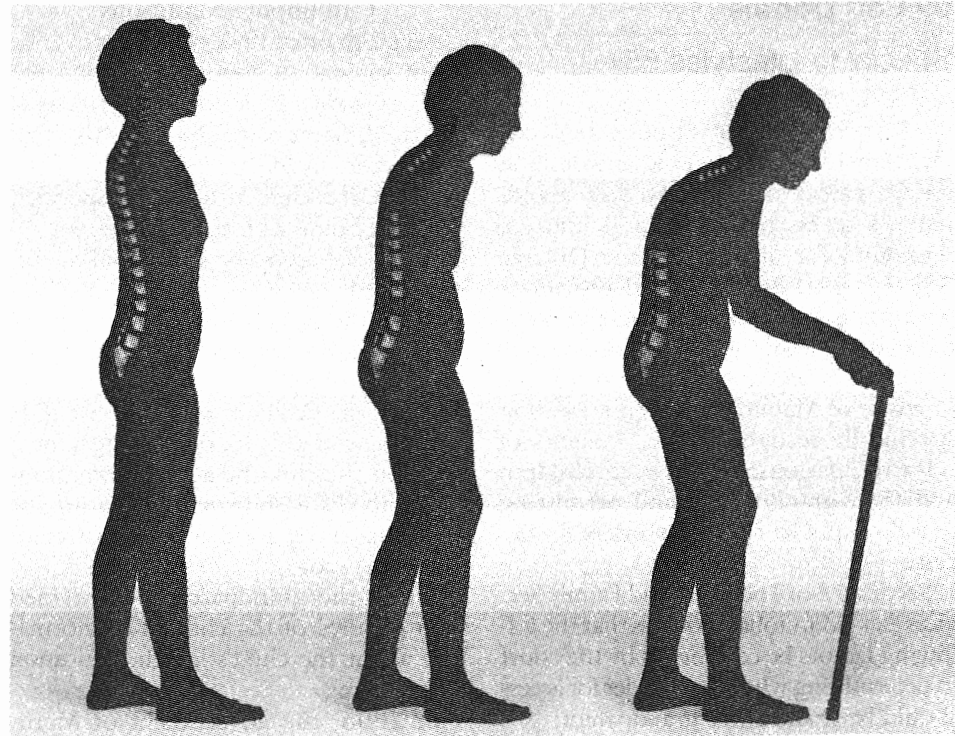
fortified soy or rice beverage.

If enough calcium cannot be obtained through diet alone, then a supplement is needed. It is important to balance your dietary intake with your supplement in order to meet the suggested 1,500-mg daily intake. When choosing a supplement, look for the amount of “elemental” calcium in the tablet. If your diet provides 1,000 mg of calcium per day you would need to add a 500-mg calcium supplement in order to achieve the 1,500-milligram goal.

There are two main types of calcium supplements: calcium carbonate and calcium citrate. Calcium carbonate needs to be taken with food, while calcium citrate can be taken at any time. The body can only absorb 500 mg of calcium at any one time so it is important to split the dose of the supplement if you need to take more than one. Many calcium supplements include magnesium to counteract the constipating effect. Magnesium is not needed for calcium to be absorbed so it is not necessary to choose a supplement with magnesium. Adequate amounts of magnesium can be achieved simply by choosing a diet rich in fruits and vegetables. Your health care provider can help you determine the appropriate type and dosage of calcium for you.

Vitamin D’s double role

Vitamin D is important in both preventing and treating osteoporosis as it helps your body absorb calcium and deposit it in your bones. It is often referred to as the “sunshine vitamin” because it is manufactured in the skin when it is exposed to the sun. Since our bodies manufacture very little vitamin D from



Bones need calcium to keep their mass and strength.

fall to spring and it is very difficult to get enough vitamin D through our diets, supplements are generally a good idea for most Canadians. Osteoporosis Canada currently recommends 800 international units of vitamin D for people over 50.

There are other dietary measures you can take to limit bone loss. Caffeine increases the amount of calcium your body excretes, so it is recommended that caffeinated beverages such as coffee, tea, and cola be limited to three or four cups per day. Sodium (salt) also causes increased calcium excretion, so the use of added salt and processed foods should

be limited as well. Excess alcohol and smoking also contribute to bone loss.

Bone is a living tissue that is constantly renewing itself. While everyday wear and tear can cause damage, we have the ability to improve our bone health and reduce our risk of developing osteoporosis through physical activity and nutrition.

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