

Preventing Osteoporosis

I stopped renewing my allergy prescription last year. I had my last snort of Rhinocort Aqua on October 14, 2008. I sneeze quite frequently now and must carry Kleenex at all times in case I have to blow my nose. People who have known me for a while keep remarking that my allergies suddenly seem so severe. They've always been like this; they just seem worse because people have never seen me unmedicated. They ask me, "Why don't you just go back on your allergy spray?" And my reply is that I don't want to be dependent on drugs, and I don't want to get osteoporosis.

Rhinocort did indeed eradicate my allergy symptoms, but it is considered a corticosteroid, one of a class of drugs widely used to treat inflammatory illnesses including allergies. According to *Taber's Cyclopedic Medical Dictionary*, common side effects of the long-term use of corticosteroids are thinning of the skin, cataract formation, glucose intolerance, immune suppression, and osteoporosis. Boy, do I wish I had known that when I first started inhaling that stuff about nine or 10 years ago. I might have chosen another way to deal with my inflamed sinuses.

I'm studying holistic nutrition, and my studies have recently made me aware that I have many of the major risk factors for osteoporosis in women, including: a family history of osteoporosis (my grandmother was tiny in her old age), a small frame, Caucasian ancestry, a 10-year cigarette habit that ended around 20 years ago, a one-time diet of sugar-free soda and other non-nutrients, and now long-term corticosteroid use. I haven't yet reached the age of menopause or even perimenopause but will have those added risk factors by and by. While I can't go back and change the past or alter my genetic makeup, there are many steps I can take to reduce or eliminate the risk factors within my control.

Thankfully, I have already quit smoking and stopped using Rhinocort. But I'm determined to do more, and I'm writing about it because osteoporosis is rampant in this country, affecting more than 20 million people. Osteoporosis is a loss of bone mass followed by an increased risk of fracture. It has been estimated that 30 to 50 percent of women and 13 to 30 percent of men will sustain an osteoporosis-related fracture in their lifetime. Many of my yoga students have already been diagnosed with either osteopenia (a reduction in bone mass

which is a precursor to osteoporosis) or osteoporosis, and I've met several women struggling with the medications that are routinely prescribed once you've been diagnosed with this disease. I've been looking into what dietary and lifestyle changes I can make to help me maintain my bone health and strength, and here is what I've discovered I should do:



1. Assess my risk/progress. The first thing I intend to do is get a baseline bone density study to assess how much bone mass I currently have. Once I know my current bone density, I can monitor how slowly or how fast my bones are breaking down.

2. Avoid excess protein. Nutritionally, I can limit my protein. Diets high in protein can accelerate bone loss by causing an increase in urinary excretion of calcium. Bone calcium also gets mobilized to buffer the acidic breakdown of the products of protein. In general, most people need between 50 to 63 grams of protein a day, according to *The Osteoporosis Solution* by Carl Germano and William Cabot.

3. Reduce/eliminate my intake of caffeine, alcohol, and sugar. All three of these substances accelerate the rate of calcium loss from the body, as do soft drinks. The phosphates in soda pull calcium from the bones, so it's a good thing I stopped drinking those.

4. Get regular exercise. Weight-bearing exercise puts stress on bones, causing them to form more bone, according to Wolff's law. The young, healthy male astronauts who developed osteoporosis during spaceflight proved Wolff's law true in the '80s. During this short period, they were relatively inactive, and their bodies weren't even subjected to normal gravitational forces. Once they returned to earth and to their normal daily routines, their osteoporosis dis-

appeared. I've read that bone loss resulting from medications like my inhaled allergy medication may be slowed or reversed with exercise, so I'm in. There are many ways to participate in weight-bearing exercise. Walk, jog, hike, do yoga, play tennis, climb the stairs, lift weights, or use strength bands. Double the benefits by incorporating two or more of these activities into your weekly routine.

5. Increase my intake of calcium and other minerals. I'm lactose intolerant, so I don't want to start chugging milk and eating wheels of cheese. Luckily for me, calcium is available in mineral water, spinach, chard, sesame seeds, and a bunch of other foods. I can take it as a supplement, along with magnesium, boron, zinc, and other vitamins.

6. Get out in Sarasota's abundant sunshine. Vitamin D enhances intestinal calcium absorption, and just 15 minutes a day of exposure can be enough time for your body to convert sunshine to vitamin D. Go for an early morning walk, or one in the late afternoon – not at noon when ultraviolet rays are at the most extreme.

I'm doing what I can to deal with my allergies holistically, and now I will implement these ideas to help me prevent what many consider inevitable. I recently read an article about Bette Calman, an 83-year-old yoga instructor in Australia who can still stand on her head and balance her entire body weight on her hands. She regularly teaches 11 classes a week! Moving to Florida has caused me to reevaluate what aging means, and if Bette is any example, I've got just as much activity ahead of me as I have behind me. And I, for one, want to meet my future standing tall. The view is better from up here, even if I have to carry a tissue.

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