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Osteoporosis; A Disease of Femininity?

BY PEGGY LUHRS

This column deals with osteoporosis as a disease of femininity. What do I mean by that? Well most current evidence suggests that in addition to getting enough calcium, the most important factor for women in preventing osteoporosis and in mitigating its effects once begun as regular weight bearing exercise. Why a disease of femininity? Because in western culture women have been discouraged from doing weight bearing exercise until just recently. Women have also been discouraged from playing sports until recently, and mainly because of feminist and lesbian work on seeing Title Nine enforced. Lesbians have been more likely to ignore these strictures. Where would softball or the WNBA be without lesbians?

But when I was in college women could not even play basketball on a full court. And not so many years ago pregnant women were told to do very little exercise. Never mind that there is no more strenuous physical event than childbirth. This followed years of doctors telling women to refrain from physical activity or their uteruses would drop out. Too much brain activity was also seen as bad for women at the turn of the last century and enforced rest cures were prescribed for upper and middle class women. Of course as Sojourner Truth reminded the women's movement from its inception, this did not apply to black women or working class women who were expected to do heavy work always. And ain't they women? But for the genteel classes the ideal femininity meant restricted activity for women and the results of this still show up in the large numbers of North American women with osteoporosis, despite heavy dairy consumption in the USA.

Now there is information that teenage girls are suffering from osteoporosis because of a lack of calcium and exercise. This is related to the fact that girls are dieting as young as ten years old. The obsession with thinness contributes to women's poor health in many ways. Most importantly, it affects the skeleton on which, literally, the whole body hangs.

During the teenage years there is an accelerated period of bone growth due, in part, to the sudden infusion of sex hormones. (About 45% of a woman's skeleton is formed during the teenage years.) The adolescent growth spurt creates a high demand for calcium, a nutrient that is essential for the development of healthy bones. However, research suggests that the average teen's diet falls short of the recommended 1200 milligrams of calcium/day. Many teens also consume large amounts of carbonated soft drinks. These beverages contain phosphorous which is known to interfere with calcium absorption. Teens who smoke are also at a disadvantage, since cigarette smoking interferes with calcium absorption as well.

("The bod squad" - better known as the National Women's Health Resource Center, a national clearinghouse for women's health information.)

Studies done on Chinese women, who have very little osteoporosis, show that calcium may best be absorbed from eating greens that contain it. Genetics are a factor too. Women at highest risk for osteoporosis are of northern European extraction with blond or red hair, thin with small bone structure. Women of African and Mediterranean descent are at less risk.

Prevention needs to begin early with adequate calcium intake, but beginning a program of weight bearing exercise is helpful at any time of life and some studies rate this is the most important part of prevention. There are calcium supplements as well, and the issue here is

which ones are best absorbed. Rosemary Gladstar has a great recipe for a high calcium candy. Women would do well to substitute this treat for other less nutritious snacks. Here's the recipe from her book *Herbal Healing for Women*:

- 1 cup sesame butter (aka tahini)
- 1/4 to 1 cup (or more) honey
- Powdered milk (enough to thicken the candy)
- 1/4 cup ground or chopped almonds
- 1/4 ground apricots
- 2-4 tablespoons powdered calcium
- 1/4 cup toasted sesame seed and/or coconut flakes

Mix honey and sesame butter into a paste. Add remainder of ingredients and mix well. Adjust flavors to taste. Thicken with powdered milk and roll into balls. Roll in toasted sesame or coconut flakes.

For comparison's sake, I'm including this little chart of calcium in dairy and other sources.

Milk, evaporated skim	1 cup	580mg
Sardines, with bones	3 oz	372mg
Collard greens, cooked	1 cup	355mg
Yogurt	1 cup	272mg
Turnip greens, cooked	1 cup	252mg
Milk, skim or 1%	1 cup	246mg
Milk, whole	1 cup	238mg

Weight bearing exercise is necessary to keep bones healthy and impacts positively on all aspects of the body. Recent studies show that regular exercise keep LDL (bad) cholesterol levels down. Exercise increases creativity as well. Any weight bearing exercise is good; walking, running, biking, dancing or aerobics. Swimming is not the thing for bones, but is good for stretching muscles and general toning. Lifting weights is great. I've just begun a program of moderate weight lifting at home with barbells. I started with three pounds and worked up to five, and then eight. This is a good way to get some muscle definition, as well as being good for osteo prevention and general body tone. You'll see results quickly, and that is very motivating. This is coming from someone who has avoided workouts all of my life. It is tough starting, but well worth the effort.

I envy young women who've grown up with sports so much more open to them. I loved athletics as a girl, but there was little support for my generation to participate. We were supposed to be the cheerleaders. Well, in addition to keeping women less than equal, it was bad for our health. I think the UVM women's basketball team's success has been a shot in the arm for women and girls in encouraging them to get into sports and generally boosting women's self esteem. I like seeing young boys asking for the player's autographs too. For lots of reasons, including our safety, its great to see women getting stronger. And its good for your health too.

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