

Osteoporosis Medications: A Discussion of Current Concerns

Over the past month I have received numerous questions from patients concerned about their osteoporosis medications increasing their risk for fractures. Many of these people had actually stopped taking their medications without discussing the risks and benefits with a healthcare professional. The reason for this concern is due to media coverage of studies looking at the long-term use of bisphosphonates. This class of osteoporosis medication is made-up of Fosamax® (alendronate), Actonel® (risedronate), and others. Through this article I hope to shed light on the findings of these studies, and discuss current recommendations for patients taking these medications.

Bisphosphonates are a common first-line option in the treatment and prevention of osteoporosis. These medications work to maintain bone mass by slowing the body's process of bone breakdown. It is through this mechanism that we have seen a documented potential for increased bone density and decreased number of fractures. For instance, alendronate has been shown to reduce the risk of spine, hip and other fractures by approximately 50% over two to four years of treatment. So why is there concern over their use? Two studies presented to the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons found that even though these drugs may help prevent fractures and increase bone for several years, there is a need to re-evaluate their long-term use. These studies demonstrated that over time, bisphosphonates may cause bone to become more brittle and prone to certain types of fractures. One specific fracture that has been linked is that of the thigh bone.

Are these studies of any significance? First of all, it is important to know that these studies were small, and may not show a true problem with bisphosphonates. In a statement released from the National Osteoporosis Foundation, it is felt that based on evidence currently available the benefits of using these medications outweigh the potential risks. They also state that even though these fractures should be taken seriously, the amount of people experiencing them is very small compared to the number of people who take the medications. With this in mind, it can be said that there is currently no clear connection between bisphosphonates and these fractures.

So what does all of this mean for people currently taking these medications? First of all it is important to know that bisphosphonates are very effective when used properly. Patients should never discontinue these medications without first talking to a healthcare professional. If you are on an osteoporosis medication it is important that you review your treatment with your physician on a yearly basis. If you have been taking these medications for over five years, you may wish to discuss with your physician the benefits of continuing treatment. Based on your risk for fractures they may decide to continue your current medication, switch you to a different medication, or stop treatment for a period of time and monitor your bone density.

It is also worth knowing other ways to keep bones healthy and strong. Some examples may include consuming sufficient calcium and vitamin D to meet your age requirements, participating in regular exercise and physical activity, and limiting your alcohol intake.

This situation highlights the importance of always looking at not only the risks, but also at the benefits of taking a medication. If you have any questions be sure to ask your physician or your pharmacist. Remember your health is our number one priority!

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