Spinal Cord Injury and Your Bones: Get the Facts

If you have a spinal cord injury, it is important to take care of your bones. Here's a few facts:

There is a disease that can make your bones thin, weak, and more likely to break. It's called osteoporosis.

- Among common risk factors are being older, being female, having a family history of osteoporosis and/or broken bones after age 50, and menopause. Certain health conditions and medicines can also cause bone loss.
- Bones that most often break as a result of osteoporosis are the spine, wrist, and hip.
- Osteoporosis is often called a "silent disease" because you can't feel or see your bones getting thinner. Many people do not even know that they have the disease until after a bone breaks.
- People with osteoporosis often break bones as a result of a simple fall.

How does my spinal cord injury relate to my risk of osteoporosis?

- If you can't walk after your injury, rapid bone loss occurs below your level of injury. Bone loss from your injury may slow down one to two years after injury. The more severe your spinal cord injury, the more severe the bone loss that may occur.
- If you were injured in your teens, your risk for osteoporosis is higher.
- If you have osteoporosis, your risk for breaking a bone due to everyday activities, even without any injury, will be higher than normal.
- Bone breaks most commonly occur in the thigh or shin bones.
- If you have a broken bone, it may not be obvious to you. Be aware of swelling, feeling flushed or sweating in the face, increased spasms, or a throbbing headache. If you have any of these tell your health care provider right away.

How do I know if I have osteoporosis?

- A bone mineral density (BMD) test is easy and reliable. It measures the density or thickness of your bones. It also measures the amount of calcium stored in your bone. The more calcium you have in the bone, the greater your bone density.
- Typically, your health care provider may recommend a BMD test if you are unable to walk. You simply lie on a table while a fast, painless, low-dose X-ray is taken.
- The radiation exposure is so low that no protective shields are needed for the patient or the X-ray technologist. In fact, the radiation is about the same amount as background radiation you receive flying in an airplane from New York to California.

What can I do to protect my bones and reduce bone loss?

Activities to build strong bones are important throughout your life. It is never too late to take steps to build strong bones, even after a spinal cord injury. To protect your bone health:

- Eat a variety of protein foods, vegetables, fruits, and whole grains.
- Choose fat-free or low-fat dairy, or a dairy alternative, to get the calcium you need. That is typically 1000 to 1200 milligrams each day. Add a supplement only if needed. Your health care provider can help with this.
- Get 600 to 800 IU or 15 to 20 mcg of vitamin D each day. Your health care provider may recommend more vitamin D. You may need a supplement.
- Physical activity is important for bone health and overall health. After a spinal cord injury, it is recommended that you participate in any type of physical activity that you can do.
- Do not smoke. Quit if you do smoke.
- Limit the amount of alcohol you drink.
- Be careful. Take steps to avoid falls. After a spinal cord injury, you may need to see a bone health specialist to find out how to best manage your bone health.

For more information, visit the New York State Osteoporosis Prevention and Education Program at: www.nysopep.org or, call the NYSOPEP Statewide Osteoporosis Resource Center at 845-786-4772.