HIV AND BONE HEALTH

Osteoporosis (OS-tee-oh-poh-ROH-sis) is a familiar term to many older adults. It generally means that a person’s bones have become weaker and are more likely to break as a result of an injury that wouldn’t normally cause a fracture. Unfortunately, many HIV-positive people—many of whom are younger than those who typically experience weakening bones—are learning that they, too, have osteoporosis.

WHAT IS OSTEOPOROSIS?
Osteoporosis means “porous bones.” It occurs when the body breaks down bone mineral and collagen—which give bones their flexibility and hardness—faster than they are replaced. In its earliest stages, bone loss is known as osteopenia (OS-tee-oh-PEE-nia). With osteoporosis, the greatest risk of fracture involves the wrist, hip or spine. However, virtually any bone in the body is more likely to fracture in someone who has osteoporosis.

WHO IS AT RISK?
Women are at higher risk than men, and the chance of developing the disease increases with age. It appears to be more common among whites and Asians compared with other races, and it’s more likely to affect thin, small-boned men and women. Menopause is a leading risk factor among women, whereas low testosterone levels can affect bone density in men. Cigarettes, too much alcohol and a number of chronic illnesses and medications are also culprits.

People living with HIV also face an increased risk of osteopenia and osteoporosis—and at a younger age than their HIV-negative counterparts.

WHAT’S THE CONNECTION WITH HIV?
Studies show that HIV-positive men younger than 25 years old are at risk of lower bone mass compared to HIV-negative men of the same age. It’s not clear why people living with HIV are at increased risk for bone loss. It could be that the ongoing immune response to HIV’s constant presence in the body causes bone to break down faster than it normally does, especially when other risk factors are present. It’s also possible that certain HIV medications may negatively affect bone health. Studies have linked protease inhibitors (Pis) and nucleoside/nucleotide reverse transcriptase inhibitors (NRTIs) to decreased bone density in people living with HIV.

HOW DO I CHECK FOR OSTEOPOROSIS?
Bone mineral density (BMD) tests are the only way to detect osteoporosis. The most widely used test is the DEXA (Dual Energy X-ray Absorptiometry). DEXA measures BMD of the spine, hip or total body. When you get a DEXA scan, you lie on a padded table while a large mechanical arm moves over you; a total body scan takes about 20 minutes to complete.

WHAT ABOUT PREVENTION AND TREATMENT?
At the present time, there is no way to cure osteoporosis. However, there are ways to help prevent it and treat it. Increasing your calcium and vitamin D levels—by taking supplements and getting more exposure to the sun—can help prevent or slow bone loss. So can exercise, which helps bones become bigger, denser and stronger. Maintaining a healthy body weight, along with cutting out tobacco and alcohol, also reduces the risk.

If you have osteoporosis, a number of medications are available, though very little is known about their effectiveness in people living with HIV. If prescribed, they are often recommended in combination with the more general strategies listed above.

QUICK TIPS
There’s a lot you can do to protect the health of your bones. Start with these steps.

■ CHECK YOUR D
Low vitamin D levels are an important first sign of possible bone loss. A simple blood test is all that’s necessary.

■ GET SCANNED
DEXA scans are easy, painless and highly accurate when it comes to looking for bone loss.

■ BUTT OUT
As if you needed another reason to quit, smoking increases the risk of bone disease.

■ MIND YOUR MEDS
If you’re at risk for bone loss, be sure to discuss this with your doctor, especially when choosing HIV meds and certain drugs used to treat other diseases.

■ START TREATMENT, WHEN NECESSARY
A variety of meds are available, but they come with side effects and may not be needed by everyone, especially those with early bone loss (osteopenia).

For more info about HIV and bone health, visit POZ.com