Is There a Link Between Lupus and Osteoporosis?

by ANNA SCANLON

Connecting Lupus and Osteoporosis

Living with lupus typically means living with a form of arthritis. Usually, this type of arthritis is not actually degenerative, meaning that it makes you simply feel uncomfortable and may leave you in a lot of pain, but it doesn't actually lead to loss of bones or bone mass.

Basically, you won't need a joint replacement like your great-aunt Rita did due to her arthritis because that is typically due to osteoarthritis. Osteoarthritis wears away at the bones over time. Rheumatoid arthritis simply refers to the swelling around the joints.

This doesn't mean that lupus has no impact on bone health, however. In fact, women with lupus are at a much higher risk for osteoporosis than those without it. And since women already experience osteoporosis at a much higher rate than men do, it is important for those of us of the female variety to bone up (har har) on how to prevent osteoporosis.

Why Are We at Risk?

So why are those with lupus more at risk for osteoporosis? There are a number of factors that come into play.

Firstly, those who take strong steroids are at a greater risk as these medications can both control your lupus and chip away at the bones themselves. Over time, this causes osteoporosis and can make you more susceptible to fractures.

Because many people with lupus are in pain and experience lupus fatigue, inactivity is a frequent side effect of living with lupus. Inactivity can also be one of the leading risk factors of osteoporosis, meaning those with lupus are more likely to develop the disease.

Studies suggest that bone loss can occur simply from having lupus SLE. It is thought that inflamed blood vessels can block the flow of blood to the bones, causing them to weaken and therefore osteoporosis to develop. Those who don't have their bone density scanned often can have no idea they are suffering from osteoporosis until they experience a fracture.

The SLE Lupus Foundation of New York reminds us that the risk of osteoporosis is very real, even in young women who feel they are not old enough to develop it. They say that 50 percent of those with lupus who break a bone from osteoporosis are under the age of 50. That is a staggering statistic!

Although there are medications that help reduce the risk or and side-effects of osteoporosis, they are not recommended for women who are not yet menopausal as they can significantly increase of adverse affects in pregnancy. Men, however, can take many of these medications and should speak to their doctor.

What Causes Osteoporosis?

Other things that can cause osteoporosis (in addition to the lupus diagnosis) include:

- Excessive alcohol consumption
- Smoking
- A family history of osteoporosis
- Having been through menopause or having lost your period for other reasons
- Failing to consume enough calcium
- Medication
- Not getting enough physical activity

Preventing Osteoporosis

So while the odds certainly are stacked against us lupus patients, there are many things we can do to ensure we don't develop osteoporosis.

Firstly, exercise is huge. This may feel totally overwhelming, but it is necessary in order to keep the body going and prevent it from allowing osteoporosis to creep up. Try swimming — a low-impact exercise that allows you a chance to rest your muscles and increase blood flow as you get in an aerobic exercise. However, swimming alone isn't enough to decrease your risk of osteoporosis — weight-bearing exercises are also necessary.

Because my knees are my most affected joint, I cannot run and sometimes have trouble walking very long distances. In order to strengthen the muscles around my knees and keep down the risk of osteoporosis, I like to both bike and use the elliptical machine.

While these are repetitive motions, they are also weight-bearing and are not too hard on the joints. Doing this for even a few minutes every day will help lower your risk of having your bones degenerate.

You can also take slow, gentle walks around your neighbourhood when you are feeling up to it. Although I don't always meet my goal, I try to walk my dog at least once a day.

Sometimes I am able to go pretty far, and sometimes I need to rest after a short distance. But no matter what, I am doing both my body and my little guy some good.

Preventing osteoporosis is also all about living a healthy lifestyle. It is not advisable for those with lupus to smoke, and excessive drinking should be curtailed. Both of these vices can lead to a degeneration in bone health in the long run and just aren't worth it. Lupus or not, excessive drinking and smoking are not good for you.

You can also help stay on track with a diet that includes lots of calcium and vitamin D. Calcium helps the bones stay strong, whilst vitamin D helps your body absorb it. Dairy, leafy greens, broccoli, white beans, okra and oranges are all great natural sources of calcium. You can also boost your calcium intake by taking daily supplements or vitamins.

Vitamin D is usually absorbed through contact with the sun, but if your lupus is triggered by excessive exposure to the sun or you live in a colder climate, it may not be enough to absorb the required amount. Aside from vitamins and supplements, vitamin D can be naturally found in orange juice, egg yolks, fatty fish and cod liver oil. Many foods are also fortified with vitamin D to increase your intake.

Speak to your doctor about monitoring your intake of both calcium and vitamin D, as they are both essential to bone health.

Additionally, as a lupus patient, talk to your doctor about having a bone density scan done every year or so. This will mean you can catch thinning bones much earlier on and you won't be caught by surprise with a nasty fracture. Instead, you can be armed with your information, ready to keep your bones healthy!