

The many faces of osteoporosis

It is very common that you would not know who has osteoporosis and who does not. The main issue is that this is largely a silent disease until the fractures occur, and without proper fracture liaison services to prevent secondary fractures, there is needless pain and suffering.

Here are some real examples of people with osteoporosis – these stories are inspirational to us all and remind us of how important it is that we urge implementation of FLS across Canada by 2015.

Larry

I've had my last fracture – and now I'm living well with osteoporosis

When I was diagnosed with osteoporosis in 1998, I had already suffered eight fractures. Like those around me I thought I was accident-prone and more than a bit unlucky. For me, a slip on wet grass or a tumble into some empty cardboard boxes meant a broken bone and yet another trip to emergency, perhaps another cast and many more months of physiotherapy. It never occurred to me nor did it occur to the various health care professionals who treated me that my fractures were somehow connected to my bone health. The fractures, themselves, received excellent treatment but the underlying cause of the broken bones went unnoticed and untreated... over and over and over again!

When I was finally diagnosed with osteoporosis I was immediately started on a prescription medication for my osteoporosis. Concerned, yet determined to improve my bone health I set off on a long journey that included better nutrition, some supplements, exercises and lifestyle changes. Success was not immediate. Two more broken bones disheartened me then helped strengthen my resolve to get better. I sought help from the experts at an osteoporosis clinic. I switched to new medications. I made more adjustments to my lifestyle. I periodically and unintentionally tested

the effectiveness of my treatment. Several low-trauma falls left me unscathed. Then five years ago a particularly hard fall that sprained both my wrists confirmed what I had been hoping – I had stopped breaking bones. My spirits lifted, my confidence grew and I regained a quality of life that I had not thought possible.

Now thirteen years after my last fracture I frequently reflect on my osteoporosis journey and one sobering thought always makes me pause – had I not been assessed, diagnosed and appropriately treated I would not be where I am today – enjoying an active, healthy retirement.

– Larry, British Columbia

Larry's example is not unique. Far too often the diagnosis of osteoporosis only comes after multiple fractures have occurred.

Christine

A mother's determination

Crack! Christine was only 42 when, bending to lift her newborn daughter, she fractured her spine. Diagnosed with five vertebral fractures as a result of unsuspected osteoporosis, she had no idea of the painful and transformative road she would have to travel to build stronger bones and reclaim her life. Here is her story.

I Get Knocked Down But I Get Up Again....

Eleven years ago, I could look down the road and see nothing but sunshine. That was before I was struck by the disease that is not just for older women, the disease that robbed me of everything I had taken for granted, the disease I never even saw coming.

I had recently completed my Executive MBA at Queen's University and I was climbing the ladder of success in the federal government. I was living comfortably with my executive husband, and we were anticipating the



birth of our first child with enthusiasm and cautious excitement.

At 42, I had had three earlier miscarriages. Determined to give birth to a healthy baby, I followed doctors' orders scrupulously. In September 2001, my daughter Chanel was born, at 8 1/2 pounds with good health. Now my daughter Chanel is 11 and still a bundle of energetic good health.

My own story has been a little darker. Because mine was a high risk pregnancy, I spent eight weeks on bed rest in the most expensive hotel of the nation's capital – the Ottawa Hospital Civic Campus. I had also been put on blood thinners. Both the bed rest and the medications proved devastating, robbing me of precious bone density. I had poor bone health going into the pregnancy but at the time, I did not know that.

1st Punch

The extent of the devastation revealed itself almost as soon as I arrived home with the baby. I was leaning over the crib to pick up my newborn daughter when I felt a jolt of pain. It nearly caused me to pass out. Luckily my husband was there to catch me from falling. The pain was debilitating.

2nd Punch

After a minor fall, I found myself in excruciating pain. It was relentless and unbearable.

Final blow

After numerous appointments and a trip to emergency, I discovered, in a diagnosis made weeks later, that I had five spinal fractures, the result of severe osteoporosis. Dr. Phil talks about defining moments in life - traumatic events that change your approach to life. Getting that phone call from the doctor telling me that I had five spinal fractures and severe osteoporosis was a defining moment for me. I wanted a quick fix. I was unable to care for my newborn baby or myself. We had to hire a full time caregiver who was bonding with my daughter more than I was.

That was then and this is now. My journey to recovery was long and a lot of hard work and it still is today. Here are my lessons learned:

1. Bone loss and fracture can happen to anyone at any age.
2. Bone loss and fracture can happen to Whether pre- or post-fracture, there are always steps that can be taken towards improving bone health and quality of life.
3. Take an active role in maintaining your well-being. Doctors don't have all the answers.
4. Do your homework before your medical appointments (i.e. know your family history; read up on medications available in Canada for bone health)
5. Improve your overall nutrition through food choices first before choosing supplements and ensure your diet includes adequate amounts of calcium and take the recommended doses of Vitamin D supplements for your age. (OC does recommend routine daily vitamin D supplementation for all Canadian adults year round.)
6. Include regular, progressive and varied bone building exercise and activities in your life (weight-bearing, such as brisk walking; strength training such as resistance bands; and flexibility routines

such as stretches)

7. Osteoporosis Canada has made huge strides in raising awareness for the disease but we all still have a lot more work to do! There are far too many broken bones that could be prevented. We need to educate not only the public but healthcare professionals as well.

Dianne

Awareness is Key

I had a lot of misconceptions about osteoporosis: “People don’t die from osteoporosis. There is a cure. It is preventable.” What I lacked was awareness. In my experience, nobody talks about osteoporosis, perhaps because they also have these misconceptions.

Osteoporosis runs in my family and now at 63 I have osteoporosis. Three years ago I had 3 compression fractures in my spine. The third fracture occurred while I was still getting over the second one. The pain was unbelievable! The first week I could not stand up long enough to take a shower or go to the doctor. When I was finally able to get in the car, my husband took me to the doctor. She gave me a powerful morphine-derivative medication for the pain, which did allow me to get some sleep. After the first month, the mornings got easier. Now, if I want to get anything done it has to be in the morning, as the pain gets worse as the day wears on.

When I go to the grocery store I have to tell the cashier not to put too much in one bag, as it is too heavy for me. I cannot push open a window, carry or lift my grandchildren or walk my dog, as I cannot bend down to clean up after him. I had to buy shoes with no laces, as I cannot bend to tie them. When in the car, every little bump jars my spine and hurts like the dickens.

I go to bed at night and try to get comfortable. Sometimes I cannot fall asleep because I hurt everywhere – my back feels like it is burning, my ribs hurt and I have to keep changing from one side to the other, which I do with great difficulty. There is no position that helps.

Doing small chores is not easy, and I am lucky to have a loving husband who pitches in when he can. But I am

used to doing for myself, so I tend to overdo. The worst is washing dishes, having to stand over the sink. After only a few are done my back begins to ache. So I sit a while, get up and do a few more, sit some more, etc. until they are done. If we have company for dinner, the dishes get done in two days instead of one. If I drop something on the floor, sometimes it stays there until my husband gets home to pick it up.

Clearly, my osteoporosis is partly genetic, and I had early menopause at age 40. But I have also done things to contribute. I smoked for 43 years. I have never been one to run to the doctor with every little thing, and have not often been sick. When we moved to BC, I did not have a doctor and relied on a walk-in clinic. I cracked a rib during this time and went to a small hospital, where I was told to take it easy and it would heal. I think part of why my osteoporosis was not diagnosed sooner was that I did not have a regular family doctor who was familiar with my history. When we moved to Parksville, I was in a lot of pain from my second compression fracture and finally got the wonderful doctor I have now, who thought of osteoporosis right away. (My early menopause was one of her clues.)

Now we are with family and friends in the US. I am being extra careful with what I do – not to fall, not to stretch too far, not to bend the wrong way – because I want to be able to attend my Dad’s 90th birthday. I also make sure to eat calcium-rich foods, take my daily vitamin D supplement and follow my medication regimen faithfully.

Since I was diagnosed, I have spoken to so many people about osteoporosis and I cannot believe how many people are unaware! So my message to you is – educate yourself. If you are 50 or older, talk to your doctor about a risk factor assessment. Learn what those risk factors are. I had three of them: genetics, early menopause and smoking. If I had known earlier what I know now, I might have saved myself a lot of pain!

These examples are not unique. Far too often the diagnosis of osteoporosis only comes after multiple fractures have occurred. For Diane the warning signs were there – a family history of osteoporosis, she was a smoker and experienced early menopause – yet she fractured a second, and then a third vertebra before the all-too-obvious underlying cause was identified.

Treatment brought an end to the recurrent cycle of breaking bones and she has now been fracture free for seven years. Together, these three individuals suffered an astonishing number of fractures before being diagnosed, slipping through the cracks in health care time and time again.

Effective treatment can dramatically improve patient outcomes, for example Diane had 3 pre-diagnosis fractures and post diagnosis had none. Larry had 8 pre diagnosis fractures and 2 post diagnosis, but has been fracture free for over 13 years.

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