



Osteoporosis Canada

Ostéoporose Canada

COPING

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Remember: You can live well with osteoporosis!

Osteoporosis in the Workplace

Over the years I have been surprised by many things about osteoporosis. Right up there with the shock of “men get osteoporosis, too” was “osteoporosis doesn’t wait for you to retire before it strikes.”

When I first learned I had osteoporosis, I was still in my forties with years to go before I retired. I became quite familiar with the many stresses repeat fractures placed on my ability to perform the job and the impact they had on my immediate workplace environment. I knew and was grateful for the fact that my employer and fellow employees helped shoulder the burden, but even with that personal knowledge, I was astounded to see the numbers in today’s feature article in COPING. The annual cost of treating osteoporosis-related fractures of working Canadians is \$1.9 billion? More than three million days of work are missed each year? Wow! How is it that every employee handbook in the country doesn’t feature a chapter on falls and fracture prevention?

Whether you are an employer or employee, *Osteoporosis in the Workplace* is a must read.

– Larry Funnell, COPN Executive

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Osteoporosis in the Workplace

Each year on Labour Day, Canada celebrates the achievements of workers from coast to coast of this great country of ours. However, for thousands of working Canadians who have recently been diagnosed with osteoporosis, a celebration may not be in the cards. For them, their jobs and their careers may have been forever changed when their doctor announced, “You have osteoporosis.”

What comes to mind when you hear the word “osteoporosis”? Is it an image of a frail, elderly woman? If so, then why publish an article on osteoporosis in the workplace? Because osteoporosis does not only affect elderly women. It affects men and women at all stages of life, including millions of people worldwide who are working.

Early on in the operation of Osteoporosis Canada’s 1-800 Bone Health line, a call

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Fracture Fact

Peak bone mass is achieved at an early age, age 16-20 for females and age 20-25 in males.

came from a man who made his living as a firefighter. He had suffered a back injury and, in the course of dealing with it, discovered he had osteoporosis and a broken bone in his spine. He thought osteoporosis was “a little old ladies’ disease.” He had no idea men could suffer from osteoporosis, even men like him, who had always led an active and healthy life with no known family history of osteoporosis. Appalled and confused, he was concerned about his future because he had a family to support but clearly could not continue as a firefighter. What was he to do?

Women and men are living longer and working longer. It is estimated that by the year 2041, 25% of the Canadian population will be over 65 (about double what it is now), and the incidence of osteoporosis and osteoporotic fractures in the workplace is likely to increase proportionally. Here are a few relevant Canadian statistics:

- At least one in three women and one in five men will suffer from an osteoporotic fracture during their lifetime.
- Osteoporotic fractures are more common than heart attack, stroke and breast cancer combined.
- Over 80% of all fractures after age 50 are caused by osteoporosis.
- The risk of a major osteoporotic fracture in Canada is among the highest in the world. Each year 30,000 Canadians break their hip and many more suffer osteoporotic fractures of the spine, wrist, shoulder and pelvis.

In 2002, the International Osteoporosis Foundation published a report titled *Osteoporosis in the Workplace*, looking in particular at the European Union, the United States and Canada. The report estimated that at that time the annual direct cost of treating osteoporotic fractures of people in the workplace in the USA, Canada and the European Union was approximately \$48 billion. In Canada alone, the estimated cost was about \$1.9 billion. This cost does not include the indirect economic costs and huge emotional price that has to be paid by someone who has suffered a hip fracture or a broken bone in their spine. Osteoporotic fractures in patients younger than 60 lead to higher relative indirect costs than in older individuals: these costs include sick leave, loss of job days and related income, unemployment and disability payments and loss of productivity to the employer, as well as emotional distress for both the patient and the family who become care givers.

A recently published report states, “The number of days missed from work (in Canada) due to osteoporosis-related fractures is estimated at 3,123,298 days (12,013 full-time employment years) for individuals aged 50 to 69 years.”¹ More often than not, osteoporosis is not recognized in the workplace as a chronic condition that needs to be accommodated.

What can you do to minimize your risk of breaking a bone at work?

Know your limitations. Learn all you can about maximizing your bone health through a balanced calcium and protein rich diet, vitamin D supplementation and regular exercise. Work with your healthcare professionals so you understand what types of activities (at home and at work) you should not do and which you can do. Recognize that there are some jobs that you should not attempt because they carry too high a risk for fracture. All provinces and the federal government have programs to help individuals find modified work that suits their abilities and physical limitations.

Be aware of your work environment. Be alert to any unsafe conditions and report them immediately to your supervisor or your health and safety committee. You have the right to refuse any tasks that are unsafe.

Help educate your supervisors, your co-workers and your health and safety committee on the importance of bone health and a fracture-free workplace. Take copies of Osteoporosis Canada's fact sheets - *Diagnosis, Drug Treatments, Nutrition* and exercise booklet *Too Fit to Fracture - to work and share them with others there. These are available by calling 1-800-463-6842 or at www.osteoporosis.ca under the Programs and Resources tab.*

Are you an employer?

You already know how work related injuries affect your bottom line but chances are that you've never given much thought to the impact osteoporosis could have on your workplace, or to the fact that one in three women and one in five men will suffer an osteoporotic fracture. You say you do not have a high-risk work environment like the firefighter? Even a simple trip over a carelessly placed extension cord can result in a fractured wrist, a week or more off work, and months of rehabilitation.

Are you a researcher?

Why not do a study on osteoporosis and the workplace? Our own research for this article tells us that much more information is needed.

Gail Lemieux's personal story will resonate with anyone whose working life was ended prematurely by osteoporosis. A home care coordinator for a medical laboratory in Barrie, Ontario, Gail enjoyed her job working with people who could not come to the lab for medical testing. In March 1980, at the age of 40, she slipped on a patch of ice in front of her home and fractured two vertebrae. She was hospitalized for two weeks and spent about six months recuperating. Gail eventually recovered, but she was not investigated or treated for osteoporosis, even though her mother had the disease and was confined to a wheelchair. In 1990 Gail slipped on the stairs at home and fractured another vertebra. Within a year she broke yet another vertebra, a common "cascade" effect among people with osteoporosis.

In almost constant pain, Gail would have to leave work early and lie flat on her back at home until heading off to work again the next morning. "I didn't really have a life at that time, certainly not of any quality," remembers Gail. She was put on long term disability because of her constant pain, inability to do her job, and the likelihood that some of her fractures may have happened at work. "It is difficult to pinpoint when and where the later fractures had occurred," says Gail. "And employers need to be concerned about possible liability issues for on-the-job injuries."

Eleven years after her first fracture, Gail was finally diagnosed with osteoporosis. "I had a dual reaction when I was diagnosed," Gail says. "One reaction was thank goodness I have a diagnosis. My other reaction was what do I do now? You know, I really didn't know anything about osteoporosis. I thought because my mother had it, that was just something that happened to her and it never crossed my mind it could happen to me. I still get a lot of pain if I do things I shouldn't do." She cannot vacuum or dust. Well, who likes housework anyway, you might say. But it makes for a restricted life. Equally frustrating is the fact that her physical limitations can mean depending on others for help with activities she used to do herself. "Your independence can certainly be jeopardized," says Gail.

Gail has not returned to work since 1991. Battling additional health concerns today, Gail does her best to stay busy, active and positive. "I'm not about to give up now," she says. Gail Lemieux went on to become a member of the Board of Directors of Osteoporosis Canada and a founding member of the Canadian Osteoporosis Patient Network.

We all recognize that as we age there are some things we can no longer do quite the same as when we were 20 years old. This realization is even more profound for those of us with osteoporosis. At work or play, osteoporotic bones cannot tolerate the same levels of stress or strain as healthy bones. Nevertheless, by acknowledging our own limitations and taking steps to maximize our bone health and minimize our fracture risk, we can still live well – *and yes we can even work well* – with osteoporosis.

¹ Tarride, et al. (2012). The burden of illness of osteoporosis in Canada. *Osteoporosis International*, 23: 2591-2600.

If you have questions about this article or any other aspect of osteoporosis, please call toll-free 1-800-463-6842 (416-696-2663 in the Greater Toronto Area) to speak to an information counsellor.

FUNNY BONE:

Laughing is good exercise. It's like jogging on the inside.

A Recipe from our Sponsor

Glazed beef medallions with Feta

Course: *Main Dishes*

Preparation Time: 5 mins

Cooking Time: 4-6 mins

Yields: 4 servings

1/2 milk product serving(s) per person

Calcium: 12% DV/ 134 mg

Ingredients

2–3 tbsp (30–45 mL) hot pepper jelly

1 1/3 lb (600 g) beef medallions

3 oz (90 g) **Canadian Feta**, crumbled

Tips

The hot pepper jelly can also be melted in the microwave for about 30 seconds on high power. The beef can also be grilled over the embers of a fire or cooked in a skillet.

Cheese alternatives: Canadian Aged Cheddar, Aged Gouda, Blue cheese.



Preparation

Preheat grill to medium-high heat.

In a small saucepan, melt hot pepper jelly over medium-low heat.

Cook beef medallions on the grill for 2 minutes.

Turn medallions over, generously baste with hot pepper jelly and add cheese. Continue to cook for 2 minutes or according to desired doneness and serve.

For more information about this recipe:
[http://www.dairygoodness.ca/getenough/recipes
/glazed-beef-medallions-with-feta](http://www.dairygoodness.ca/getenough/recipes/glazed-beef-medallions-with-feta)

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