

Aging Happens: Keeping bones healthy lessens fall risk

By Ellen Waldman

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Back in November, Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg, 85 years old, fell and fractured three ribs. This was a very unfortunate event, although it seems she's doing much better lately. Many people are not that surprised when they read about an older person falling and breaking a bone. That same week, an acquaintance of mine, who is decades younger than Justice Ginsberg, also fell. She was in an airport and tripped over someone's luggage, ending up with three broken bones in her foot and leg. This idea that only older people break bones when they fall is a misunderstanding of how things can happen.

Several times in the past, I have written about fall risk and safety around the home in the hope of helping you avoid this outcome. We know that the two main reasons people fall are 1) their environment and 2) their own bodies. Often it's a combination of both. This column will address the bone component of this risk.

In October of 2018, I attended a presentation called "Bone Health" offered by the Mederi Center in Ashland (<http://mederifoundation.org/>) and one of their medical providers, Dr. Susan Saccomanno. From its website: "Dr. Susan Saccomanno has a decade of experience as a family physician with a specialty in holistic cancer care and chronic illness. She has been practicing at the Mederi Centre for Natural Healing since 2014, where she blends the best of naturopathic and Chinese traditions." Dr. Saccomanno and her presentation were very informative, and I learned a lot about this topic I had not heard before.

Like many of you, I have a real interest in keeping my bones healthy. If changes in bone health have already occurred, it's vital to pay attention to these changes without delay. Here are a few questions I asked Dr. Saccomanno on this topic.

1. What do people need to keep in mind related to bone health as we age?

Dr. S: Bone health is a complex system that needs to be addressed through multiple pathways to be optimally effective. I assess the body's ability to rebuild, known as the anabolic potential, digestive health for absorbing minerals, hormonal health, and tendency to cellular acidity or alkalinity. Calcium supplementation has shown very little efficacy in staving off osteoporosis and so we need a much broader and more creative look into bone-building mechanisms.

2. Can you describe some important steps people can take with regards to supplements, in order to keep their bones healthier?

Dr. S: In my initial treatment of osteoporosis I give a supplement that contains herbs such as Rhaptonicum carthamoides, Ajuga, and Shilajit, which enhances the body's rebuilding capability. It also contains herbs with specific bone-building data such as Cissus, and Epimedium. Additionally, I make sure people are getting a good potassium supplement as there is some great data on rebuilding bone in the osteoporotic setting. I use potassium bicarbonate or potassium citrate.

3. What your interest is in this topic and how do you provide services to address this?

Dr. S: I am a Naturopathic physician and support people through discussions about diet, lifestyle, and supplements which may enhance their health.

Here are a few more important points that Dr. Saccomanno covered in her presentation. We've all heard about the importance of a bone scan, called DEXA. This is considered the gold standard in the diagnosis of bone health. What you may not know is that it does not discern between healthy bones, which is what we hope for, and calcified bone, which is not a sign of good bone health. It does however allow the doctor to at least see the bone density.

I also was reminded about the importance of vitamin D, the sunshine vitamin. She explained how the right dosage helps the absorption of calcium and phosphorus for bone mineralization, growth and repair. Here in Southern Oregon, we have less than optimal sunlight during some seasons of the year. So, having your vitamin D levels checked and supplemented as needed is a great idea.

One in three Oregonians over 65 falls each year. Our fall rate is 70 percent higher than the national average. (Oregon DHS, 2007 report; Jackson County Public Health OHSU/SOU "Don't Fall for Me" Medical Examiner Project). It's clear that this is a topic with much to consider. Keeping your bones as healthy as possible is one way to prevent a very unfortunate result from a fall.