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Beat the silent saboteur with strength training

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July 24, 1998

Contact: Jane Edlund, fitness coordinator, UM and St. Patrick Hospital, (406) 243-6948.

BEAT THE SILENT SABOTEUR WITH STRENGTH TRAINING
(Also see attached sidebar.)

By Terry Brenner
University Relations

Are you getting shorter? If you are, osteoporosis, the silent saboteur, may be at work in your bones.

Osteoporosis is a disease that makes the bones increasingly brittle, porous and fragile, and one of its surest signs is loss of height, according to Missoula physician Wes Wilson.

Eighty percent of its victims are women, many of whom won't know they have the disease until they break a bone, says Jane Edlund, fitness coordinator for The University of Montana and Missoula's St. Patrick Hospital. If those women had checked their height regularly, they might not have been caught unaware. Wilson says people should be measured for height every year as a routine part of a medical exam. A height check is especially important for women because of their much greater representation in the population of osteoporosis victims.

If you find you don't measure up as you once did, take action. Watching yourself slowly shrink year by year is no way to combat this often deadly disease. Maybe you take calcium with vitamin D and eat calcium-rich foods. These include yogurt, skim milk, collards,

-more-

Osteopor .rl--2

turnip greens, canned sardines or salmon with bones, and calcium fortified cereals.

If you're a post-menopausal woman, maybe you take hormones to enhance the effectiveness of the calcium and vitamin D. Maybe you walk regularly or participate in some other form of aerobic exercise. All those are good weapons in the arsenal to fight osteoporosis.

Edlund would have you add something else: strength training. Unfortunately, she says, the suggestion isn't popular with women.

"They equate strength training with huge, sweating men," she says. "As soon as I tell women they should strength train, they go 'I don't want to look like a bodybuilder.' Everyone has this feeling that as soon as you start lifting weights, you're going to get huge muscles and look like a freak."

That's wrong, of course. Strength training won't make a woman look like a man, Edlund says. But done correctly and in moderation, it will help fight osteoporosis because the stronger a person's muscles, the more they pull against the bones. This forces the bones to get stronger.

Dumbbells and barbells aren't required. Edlund recommends that strength-training novices start with body resistance exercises, ones that use the body's own weight as the stressor. Her repertoire includes the familiar pushups, situps and squats. These exercises will strengthen most of the major muscles groups, she says.

Pushups strengthen upper body muscles and can be done various ways -- on the floor or against a wall, for example. Situps, which strengthen the abdominal muscles, also come in a variety of forms which Edlund lumps together as "crunch" exercises, which you perform lying

on your back with your knees bent.

“You can bring the ribs toward the hips to focus more on the upper abdominal muscles, or you can bring the hips toward the ribs to focus more on the lower abdomen,” she says. To exercise the oblique abdominal muscles, bring the right shoulder toward the left hip and vice versa. To counterbalance the abdominal crunch exercises, roll onto your stomach and raise your shoulders 2 to 3 inches off the floor. This pulls the opposite direction and strengthens the lower back muscles.

Squats are a particular favorite with Edlund because they’re functional. “We’re going to have to do squatting for the rest of our lives, so we want to keep these muscles strong,” she says.

The muscles in question are the hamstrings, the quadriceps and the gluteus maximus. The hamstrings go up the back of the thigh and attach to the bottom of the pelvis. The quads are the four muscles that make up the front of the thigh. The gluteus maximus is the largest muscle in the buttocks.

Edlund is precise about performing the squat: “Don’t go lower than 90 degrees, and line up your joints so that the knee is directly over the ankle.”

If resistance exercises seem too tame, Edlund suggests using weights or machines, either at home or at a fitness center. Also available, she says, is resistance tubing, which is nothing more than a length of surgical tubing fitted with handles on each end. This simple, portable and cheap piece of equipment is ideal for people who travel, she says, because it makes a small package and can be stretched in dozens of ways to strengthen all the muscle

groups in the body.

The important thing is to develop a routine that fits your lifestyle and matches your abilities. Never launch into a strenuous program without checking first with your doctor. If you're in doubt about how, how much and how hard to exercise, Edlund recommends taking a class, watching a video or hiring a personal trainer.

Exercise at least two days a week, she says. Work all the major muscle groups, which means 10 to 12 exercises. This will take 20 to 30 minutes. Work the muscles until they're tired.

Because the human body is smart and efficient, in two or three months it will figure out how to get through an exercise routine with as little energy output as possible, Edlund says. That's the time to change the routine, to "trick" the muscle into working harder, because overloading the muscle is what strengthens it, she says. Edlund suggests doing different exercises or changing their order or the pace you do them or the number of them you do.

"People want a program they can do for the rest of their lives," she says. "It doesn't work that way. It's not realistic to think you can do one exercise program and it will be good forever. There's a general program you can follow, but you need to change exercises."

For those who have never done strength training, Edlund has encouraging words: People can get stronger into their 70s, 80s and 90s.

"You can't say, 'I'm 80 so I'm too old for my muscles to respond,'" she says. "It's never too late."

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