

Leicestershire Adult Eating Disorders Service

Health problems resulting from eating disorders

OSTEOPOROSIS

This leaflet provides information for patients about osteoporosis. This is a physical problem that can result from eating an inadequate diet and maintaining a low body weight.

We have given you this leaflet to provide you with information that is important to you, not to worry you or upset you. The information in this leaflet may raise questions to discuss with your doctor or therapist. It will help explain why you may need certain blood tests or other investigations.

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Osteoporosis

Osteoporosis literally means 'porous bones'. When it occurs, bones become less dense or thinner, making them fragile and more likely to break.

Osteoporosis is a 'silent' disease as people cannot feel their bones getting thinner. A DEXA scan (bone scan) can show osteoporosis, or its beginning stage which is called osteopenia. However, for some patients, the first sign of osteoporosis may be when a fracture occurs.

People with Anorexia Nervosa are at very high risk of developing osteoporosis, especially if they remain at a low weight for a long period of time.

The reason that low weight causes osteoporosis is that it is linked with amenorrhoea (absent periods), poor nutritional intake, and reduced weight bearing on the bones. In addition, for many patients, anorexia nervosa begins in the teenage years, which is when bone density is usually increasing.

Osteoporosis will usually start after a year of being at a low weight, and will become more severe over time if the low weight continues.

Patients with osteoporosis will be at increased risk of fractures in young adulthood. As well as breaks to the long bones, there may be vertebral collapse leading to curvature of the spine and a decrease in height.

Once osteoporosis has occurred, it is not reversible. It is not possible for bones to fully go back to their original strength.

However, there are things which can reduce further thinning of your bones and possibly give you some increase in your bone density.

How to reduce risks of osteoporosis

The best and most reliable way to halt osteoporosis, and even reverse it slightly, is to restore weight and resume normal periods.

Along the way, use of calcium and vitamin D supplements may be advised. The evidence suggests that these may help a little, in some patients. However, this will never work as well as weight gain. Drinking plenty of milk and exposing your arms to the sun can also help to boost your calcium and vitamin D levels.

There is no clear evidence that the contraceptive pill or patch will reduce the risk of osteoporosis. On average the effect is neutral. There are other medications for osteoporosis but these may have side effects and potential risks. We would not routinely recommend these to our patients. However, if a patient feels strongly that they wish to explore the use of medication further then we would suggest you discuss this with your GP.

Physical exercise has its pros and cons for patients with eating disorders as excessive exercise can be a problem in its own right. In general, if a patient is at a low weight, we would not recommend exercise which would cause further weight loss. Also, if bones are already thin, then high impact exercise can cause fractures. Gentle weight bearing exercise is probably best.

If you have any questions or concerns about the information in this leaflet you can raise these with your doctor or therapist or leave a message with our secretaries on 0116 225 2557.