

Spend some time in the sun – for your mood and your bones



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The UK media recently reported some worrying news of children being diagnosed with rickets, an 'old-fashioned' disease that died out after the Second World War. Bone disorders such as rickets have been linked to a deficiency vitamin D, and some have blamed the aggressive sun awareness campaigns that highlight the dangers of the sun. Of course, the sun has some great health benefits too and it's a shame that we sometimes forget to mention this. As well as brightening our mood, the sun is a great source of vitamin D – vital for healthy bones. The vitamin is made by our body under the skin in reaction to summer sunlight and helps to absorb calcium into our bones.

Upon further reading, I discovered the rate of women suffering from osteoporosis is also rising at alarming levels. Whilst the link between vitamin D and osteoporosis is still under examination, it's undeniably a growing concern for women all over the world.

Osteoporosis is a lifestyle disease, not to be confused with age-related, degenerative

diseases osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis. It affects the whole skeleton, causing pain and limited mobility. In simple terms, osteoporosis occurs when the bones do not regenerate quickly enough to replace deteriorating bones, leaving them brittle and fragile. Osteoporosis is known as the 'silent disease' because diagnosis doesn't usually occur until after a first fracture.

In the UAE, it's estimated that 1 in 3 women over the age of 50 will suffer from osteoporosis. Recent figures also suggest that 58% of Saudi women currently suffer from the disease compared with just 2% of Saudi men. The National Osteoporosis Foundation says that women are four times more likely to develop osteoporosis than men because of the reduced levels of the oestrogen hormone during menopause and the consequential effect this has on bone density.

There are also lifestyle and cultural reasons. Conservative dress codes in the Middle East mean many women aren't exposing their skin to the sunlight, and therefore not getting enough vitamin D. Sedentary lifestyles have also been blamed as a lack of exercise is a great contributing factor to weakening bones.

Although there is no cure for the disease, there are several medications available to prevent and treat osteoporosis. In addition, a well-balanced diet rich in calcium and vitamin D, regular weight-bearing exercise and a healthy lifestyle can prevent or lessen the effects of the disease.

The International Osteoporosis Foundation has a number of campaigns and initiatives to raise awareness of osteoporosis. One campaign is the world-wide 'Capture the Fracture', which aims to set an internationally endorsed standard of healthcare for dealing with fractures, focusing particularly on preventing sec-

ondary fractures. Last year, RAK Hospital in the UAE held a 'Love Your Bones' event which offered women and men bone density scans. These scans determined whether osteoporosis was a risk, enabling the patient to make changes to their lifestyle, and consequently delaying or even preventing the risk of osteoporosis.

Prevention of osteoporosis still remains the most effective 'cure' and thankfully it's possible to reduce the risk of developing the disease. Spending 10-15 minutes a day in the sunshine and a balanced diet with oily fish and eggs will increase vitamin D levels, and exercises such as swimming, jogging or tennis will help maintain bone health. It's also recommended that post-menopausal women or women over the age of 50 get regular bone density scans to keep an eye on their bone health. All of these basic changes will not only help minimise the chances of getting osteoporosis, but will also improve your general health too. So when the sun does come out, enjoy it. It does wonders, not just for your mood but for your physical health too. 

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