Celiac Disease

by YVONNE BANKS

The Connections Between Celiac Disease and Osteoporosis

Celiac disease is an inherited condition in which the body cannot tolerate gluten. Gluten is the protein component of wheat and other grains that triggers a reaction. Celiac disease affects people in different ways. It can begin in childhood or in adulthood. Symptoms vary from person-to-person and may or may not occur in the digestive system. They may include:

- diarrhea
- irritability
- weight loss
- abdominal pain
- depression

Often, celiac disease is not considered as a possible diagnosis and is overlooked. It can be difficult for a medical practitioner to detect the intolerance as symptoms are varied and may only occasionally bother the patient.

How Celiac Disease Causes Osteoporosis

With celiac disease, nutrients consumed by the individual are inefficiently absorbed. The patient becomes malnourished and can become anemic. Delayed growth and small stature can result in children with the disease, as bone mass development can be compromised. In adults, bone loss increases the risk of osteoporosis.

The small intestine is the part of the gastrointestinal tract that absorbs important nutrients, including calcium. We all know that calcium builds and maintains strong, healthy bones. For people who have celiac disease, there's a greater risk of a deficiency. Even if they consume the required calcium needed to maintain proper bone health, it isn't absorbed. They lose this essential nutrient and have low bone density as a result.

How to Manage Osteoporosis as a Celiac Patient

Celiac patients should follow a gluten-free diet. This will control the diarrhea that is commonly associated celiac disease and will allow calcium to be absorbed. The normal absorption of nutrients in the small intestine should take about three months to be restored, but for older adults, it may take up to two years.

When calcium absorption is restored, there will be significant improvements reflected in bone density. As well as a gluten-free diet, other strategies should be practiced to promote stronger bones and increase bone mass.

Improving Bone Health

- **Nutrition.** Be sure to eat a well-balanced diet that is rich in calcium. Include vitamin D as it helps calcium to absorb nutrients more effectively.

- **Exercise.** Bones need to be exercised just like the muscles. They need to be stimulated so they can build mass and become stronger. Weight-bearing exercises can help achieve this strength. This includes walking, running, and other activities for which you use the full weight of your body against gravity. Swimming does not stimulate the bones, so it is not a good activity for bone health.
- **Healthy lifestyle.** Smoking and alcohol have a negative effect on bone health and lead to bone loss and fractures.
- **Bone density test.** Have a bone mineral density (BMD) test done to measure your bone density in various areas of your body. It can detect osteoporosis before a fracture occurs. It can also predict the chances of any potential fracturing.
- **Medication.** Your doctor may recommend medication to help prevent or treat osteoporosis.