

Men should exercise to reduce their risk of broken bones in later life

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Serious fractures are common among older people and can have devastating consequences, particularly if a hip is broken. It is already recommended that women should take exercise to reduce the thinning of their bones, but now research published in PLoS Medicine shows that men too can help avoid fractures if they participate in sport or other vigorous activity.

The thinning of the bones with age is known as osteoporosis. Women are at particular risk of ‘osteoporotic fractures’ as the thinning of their bones increases markedly after the menopause. But it is wrong to think of osteoporosis as a ‘woman’s disease’. Osteoporotic fractures are a risk for men too.

Karl Michaelsson and colleagues at University Hospital, Uppsala, Sweden, report research in which over 2000 men were asked, during 1970 to 1973, about the amount of physical activity they took outside working hours. They were asked the same questions again when they were aged 60, 70, 77, and 82. A record was also kept of the number of fractures the men had suffered during the 35 years of the study. (Although some of the men died before the end of the study, about half were still alive at the end.)

On the basis of the answers to the questions on physical activity at the start of the study, the researchers divided the men into three categories: those whose lifestyle was considered to be “sedentary,” those whose leisure activities included some walking and cycling, and those who

participated in sports for at least 3 hours a week. These were referred to as the low, medium, and high-activity groups. Over the 35 years, 428 men had at least one fracture and 134 broke a hip, but there were big differences between the groups—20% of the low-activity men had fractures, compared with 13% of those with medium activity and only 8% of those in the high-activity group. In particular, the chance of having a hip fracture was reduced by increased activity.

The researchers conclude that taking exercise reduces the risk of an osteoporotic fracture in men. Participating in sports seems to be particularly effective; they calculate that one-third of fractures could be prevented if men could be persuaded to take part in sports regularly.

The implications of the study are also discussed in an article in the same issue of PLoS Medicine by Dr. Harri Sievanen and Dr. Pekka Kannus.

Citation: Michaelsson K, Olofsson H, Jensevik K, Larsson S, Mallmin H, et al. (2007) Leisure physical activity and the risk of fracture in men. *PLoS Med* 4(6): e199.

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