Should I stop my bone medicine (bisphosphonate)?

Who is this handout for?
This handout is for postmenopausal women (women who are no longer having periods) and men over 50.

Should YOU stop?
If you have been on a bisphosphonate for a long time, you may be nervous about stopping it. The choice to stop needs to be made by understanding the risks and benefits for YOU. Talk to your healthcare provider about whether stopping your bisphosphonate is the right choice for you.

You probably should NOT stop if:
- You are on a bisphosphonate and your bone test suggests you are at risk of fractures (T-score at the femoral neck remains below -2.5)
- You have had a fracture during the time you have been taking a bisphosphonate
- You have health conditions that require you to take steroid medications regularly

What are bisphosphonates?
Bisphosphonates (biss-FOSS-fuh-nates) are medications that are used for preventing bone breaks or fractures. Bisphosphonates include:
- Fosamax (alendronate)
- Boniva (ibandronate)
- Actonel or Atelvia (risedronate)
- Reclast (zolendronic acid)

Why stop?
Bisphosphonates are very helpful for preventing bone fractures in women and men with osteoporosis (severe low bone density) and osteopenia (mild low bone density). However sometimes treatment goes on for longer than is needed. New research suggests that there are risks of staying on a bisphosphonate for long periods of time. Some of these risks include:
- Breaking a thigh bone
- Bone, joint, or muscle pain
- Problems with the health of your jaw bone
- Kidney problems (for zolendronic acid)

When should people stop?
There are no firm rules about when to stop. If you are at low risk for fractures, it may be reasonable to stop alendronate or risedronate after 5 years of treatment and zolendronic acid after 3 years. If you are at high risk of fractures, it may be best to continue treatment.

### Step 1. Get ready to stop
Stopping your bisphosphonate doesn't mean forgetting about your bones. Be sure you are doing what you can to keep your bones strong. Check out our Tips for Strong Bones for ideas.

### Step 2. Get enough calcium & vitamin D
The safest and probably the most effective source of calcium is diet, not supplements. However calcium and vitamin D may come from food, supplements, or a combination of both. Don’t take more than is recommended. Too much can be harmful.
- Take 1,200 mg per day of calcium
- Take 800 to 1,000 international units (IU) of vitamin D per day

### Step 3. Stop your bisphosphonate
You should be able to simply stop your bisphosphonate without any side effects.

### Step 4. Check-in and get tested
Let your healthcare provider know that you stopped your bisphosphonate. This is important to note in your medical record. Experts suggest checking your bone mineral density (BMD) at least every other year after stopping a bisphosphonate. If your tests show your bones are weakening faster than expected (more than 3% to 4% in the spine or 4% to 5% in the hip versus when the bisphosphonate was first stopped) it may make sense to restart a bisphosphonate.

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Should I take a calcium or vitamin D supplement?

Calcium and Vitamin D

Calcium and vitamin D are needed to maintain healthy bones and are especially helpful for adults with osteoporosis. Vitamin D is helpful for patients with a recognized vitamin D deficiency.

Calcium is best absorbed into your body if it is taken with vitamin D. Vitamin D can come from foods, supplements, or be made naturally. Your skin makes vitamin D from UVB rays in sunlight.

How much do I need?

**Calcium**
- 1000 mg a day for women up to age 50 and men up to age 70
- 1200 mg a day for women 51 years and older and men 71 years and older

**Vitamin D**
- 400-800 international units per day for men and women under age 50
- 800-1000 international units per day for men and women age 50 and older

How do I get calcium and vitamin D from my diet?

Foods that contain calcium:
- Milk, yogurt, cheese and other dairy products
- Green leafy vegetables such as kale and broccoli
- Beans, tofu, and almonds
- Soy milk and almond milk
- Calcium is added to many food products, such as orange juice, soy milk, tofu, ready-to-eat cereals, and breads. These are good sources of calcium if you do not eat a lot of dairy products or are on a vegan diet.

Foods that contain vitamin D:
- Salmon, tuna
- Green leafy vegetables
- Vitamin D “fortified” cereals

If you aren’t sure how much calcium and vitamin D you are getting from foods, this online calculator may help you: [http://www.webmd.com/diet/calcium-food-calculator/default.htm](http://www.webmd.com/diet/calcium-food-calculator/default.htm)

The safest and probably the most effective source of calcium for strong bones and overall health is diet, not supplements.

Examples of Calcium-Rich Foods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Food, Standard Amount</th>
<th>Calcium (mg)*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dairy products</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plain yogurt, non-fat 8-oz container</td>
<td>452</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plain yogurt, low-fat 8-oz container</td>
<td>415</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fruit yogurt, low-fat 8-oz container</td>
<td>345</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swiss, mozzarella, cheddar, and provolone cheese, 1.5 oz</td>
<td>300-400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pasteurized process American cheese food, 2 oz</td>
<td>323</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fat-free (skim) milk, 1 cup</td>
<td>306</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1% low-fat milk, 1 cup</td>
<td>290</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low-fat chocolate milk (1%), 1 cup</td>
<td>288</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Vegetables</strong>¹</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kale, ½ cup cooked</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broccoli, ½ cup cooked</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orange juice with added calcium, 1 cup</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Almond milk (fortified), 1 cup</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*amounts may vary slightly with different brands
¹Calcium from vegetable sources is not as well absorbed as that from dairy sources
Should I take a calcium or vitamin D supplement?

What are the risks of taking a calcium supplement?
- Some studies have shown that calcium supplements may increase the risk of heart disease and kidney stones.
- Supplements may cause calcium deposits to form in your kidney (kidney stones) or in your arteries which can cause heart disease.
- Calcium from food sources is not associated with an increased heart disease risk.
- For women with osteoporosis or broken bones after age 50, or those with significant risk factors for fracture, the benefits of calcium supplements are likely to outweigh any risks.

What if I need a supplement?
There are many over-the-counter choices for calcium and vitamin D supplements that you can buy at a pharmacy. Here are some tips to consider:
- Multivitamins usually include some calcium but may not be enough to meet the recommended daily amount.
- Choices for supplements include chewable tablets, pills, combinations of calcium and vitamin D, etc. Ask a pharmacist if you need help finding the supplements that make the most sense for you.
- The amount of calcium varies depending on the supplement. Look for how much elemental calcium is in the supplement. This is what you want to equal 1,000 mg to 1,200 mg per day.
- Your body absorbs calcium best in small doses throughout the day. Taking more than 500 milligrams at one time is not recommended.
- Taking your calcium with meals will increase the amount of calcium absorbed.
- Calcium may interfere with other supplements or medications you may be taking. Ask a pharmacist if you aren’t sure.
- If you are taking an antacid or acid blocker, it is best to use calcium citrate.
- Most over the counter products contain vitamin D2 (ergocalciferol) or D3 (cholecalciferol). D3 is a little more potent however either D2 or D3 is recommended.

Other Tips for Strong Bones

You can do a lot to help prevent bone breaks or fractures. Try as many of these ideas as you can.

Do Weight-Bearing Exercises
- Weight-bearing means exercises where your body is working against gravity and your feet and legs have to hold you up. Examples are walking, climbing stairs, yoga, Tai-Chi, dancing, and tennis.
- In Vermont “RSVP recruits, supports and places persons, 55 and over, in a variety of non-profit agencies and health care facilities.” Some counties offer weight-bearing exercise through their RSVP Bone Builders program.

Rutland and Addison Counties:
http://www.volunteersinvtt.org/bonebuilders.php

Bennington, Windham, Windsor Counties:
http://rsvpvt.org/programs/bone-builders

Central VT and Northeast Kingdom:
http://www.volunteersinvt.com/bonebuilders%20classes.htm

Lower your risk for falling
- Make sure to have regular eye exams and wear glasses if you need them.
- If any of your medications make you feel light-headed or dizzy, talk to your healthcare provider or pharmacist.
- Remove area rugs and other trip hazards from your home.
- Limit or avoid alcohol.

Stop Smoking
Smoking is bad for your bones and your overall health. Contact the Vermont Quit Line for help online at www.vtquitnetwork.org or by phone at 1-800-QUIT-NOW (784-8669).

References