



European strontium drug spurs supplement sales in U.S.

Living a long and healthy life requires keeping the body in good condition, including the skeleton. After age 50 the risk for osteoporosis and bone fractures increases greatly.

Consuming adequate calcium, vitamin D, protein and a host of other essential nutrients helps to reduce the risk, but many people might need the additional help of bone medications.

The most common drugs currently used in the U.S. are the well-studied bisphosphonate drugs such as Fosamax and Boniva. Recent news about rare but serious side effects of these effective drugs has been confusing for consumers, and there is growing interest in alternatives.

Question: Are there any new alternatives to bisphosphonate drugs?

Answer: A drug called strontium ranelate is commonly prescribed in several European countries. It is sold under the brand name Protelos and works by providing the mineral stron-

tium, which becomes incorporated into the bones much like calcium. Human trials show that the overall effect of strontium is to stimulate bone growth, inhibit bone loss and therefore decrease the incidence of bone fractures much the same as the bisphosphonate drugs.

Although the patented Protelos drug is not approved for use in the U.S., nonpatentable forms of strontium, such as strontium citrate, are now available as dietary supplements. Theoretically, these supplements should dissolve and deliver strontium to the bones as efficiently as strontium ranelate.

Unfortunately, the supplement forms of strontium have not been tested in large studies like Protelos, and supplements are not usually produced under the tightly controlled conditions used for prescription drugs.

Q: Are strontium supplements a reliable source of strontium?

A: Not always. A study reported at the International Bone and Mineral Research Confer-

ence in Honolulu late last year found that three out of five products tested contained significantly less strontium than their labels indicated. The two properly labeled products were AOR Strontium Support and Strontium Bone Maker. These supplements are available without prescription, but it is best to use them only with the knowledge and guidance of your physician, who can consider any potential risks that might apply to your case.

Q: Are any foods a good source of strontium?

A: Information about the strontium content of foods is limited. A study in Finland estimated that the typical Finnish diet provided about two milligrams of strontium a day. In comparison, the Protelos drug provides about 700 milligrams of strontium per daily dose.

Alan Titchenal, Ph.D, CNS and Joannie Dobbs, Ph.D, CNS
are nutritionists in the Department of Human Nutrition, Food and Animal Sciences,
College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources, UH-Manoa.
Dr. Dobbs also works with the University Health Service.
