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Bisphosphonates

Bisphosphonates are the most common osteoporosis medications. Alendronate (**Fosamax**), Risendronate (**Actonel**), Ibandronate (**Boniva**), and Zoledronic acid (**Reclast**) are all bisphosphonates. They all are similar in their actions. They all can have problems. Each has its own advantages and disadvantages.

Remember that none of these medications can work without Calcium and Vitamin D.

All bisphosphonates act by depressing bone resorption. This decreases bone loss (good). Bisphosphonates also eventually depress bone formation. This decreases bone repair (bad). The net result is that bone turnover slows down. This allows increased calcium deposition in bone. This increases bone density. However, this does not increase bone mass. It does not repair or replace bone eaten away by Osteoporosis. The bone already in place becomes more dense, more hard, more rigid, and sometimes more brittle.

Long term use of a bisphosphonate can slow bone turnover too much. In some individuals, long term use of a bisphosphonate can cause bone to stop repairing the tiny microfractures that occur with activities such as walking or chewing. Osteonecrosis of the jaw is a rare complication in normal use for osteoporosis. Most cases have been in individuals on extra high doses for complications of cancer. However, a few cases have occurred on normal doses for more than 3 to 5 years duration.

Many experts recommend a “drug holiday” after 5 years on bisphosphonates. You need to check your DXA every year. **Of course you must continue Calcium and Vitamin D.** Some patients can go an extra 5 years without loss of bone. Some must go back on medication.

Oral bisphosphonates must be taken on a completely empty stomach. You must then drink a full 8 oz glass of water. This should be pure water, with nothing added. Some well waters and mineral waters can be a problem. You then must remain standing or sitting fully upright for 30 minutes for weekly pills or 60 minutes for monthly pills. Only then can you eat. Oral bisphosphonates often cause some stomach upset.

Intravenous (IV) bisphosphonates cause no stomach upset. They are taken once every 3 months (**Boniva**) or once every year (**Reclast**). You must first be tested for adequate kidney function. IV (**Reclast**) often causes flu-like symptoms for 3 to 5 days the first year it is given. It must be given slowly in an Infusion Center and the patient must be monitored. IV (**Boniva**) can be given more quickly and in the office.

Remember that NONE of these medications can work without Calcium and Vitamin D.

Determining the best medication for each individual requires a detailed evaluation of your medical history, lab work, DXA score and trend, and living situation. That is why **we allocate a full half hour visit for each patient.**

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