

Pill helps to keep bones healthy

By Roger Dobson

Women who take the contraceptive Pill may have stronger bones when they are older. New research in women over 50 shows that Pill users had significantly greater bone density and were at a reduced risk of osteoporosis.

Use of the Pill for five to ten years was also associated with a significantly reduced risk of deformity of the vertebrae, a symptom of osteoporosis that can result in disability.

'These findings suggest that contraceptive Pill use in earlier life may have a long-term protective effect on bone health, especially that of the spine,' says Shuying Wei, who led the study.

Osteoporosis, where the bones become weak and fragile, affects about three million Britons and is responsible for a quarter of a million fractures a year.

Bone is made of an outer shell encasing tough elastic fibres and inside, minerals including calcium, blood vessels and bone marrow. It constantly repairs itself in a process called bone turnover, where cells called osteoclasts break down old bone and others, osteoblasts, build new bone.

Bones are at their strongest in early adult life when this process is balanced, but with age it goes out of kilter, leading to a reduction in bone density.

Women are at greater risk of developing osteoporosis than men because changes in hormone levels after the menopause can affect bone density. Oestrogen is essential for healthy bones, and hormone-replacement therapy has been widely used to combat osteoporosis in menopausal women.

In the new study, researchers at the University of Tasmania investigated whether exposure to the hormone-based contraceptive Pill taken by young women had any long-term protective effects after menopause many years later.

The results, which took into account other factors that could have an effect, including weight and height, alcohol consumption and current use of HRT, show significant differences. Women who used the Pill had a total body bone density six per cent greater than women who had never used the Pill. Results also show the bone density increased with time on the Pill, with the greatest benefits seen with more than ten years' use.

Consultant spinal surgeon Ian Harding says: 'Although anything that improves bone density and reduces problems in the vertebrae has to be a good thing, the use of the Pill to do this has to be taken in the context of the other effects and potential side effects of the Pill and therefore it may not be appropriate for all.'

Sorry Pauline, but you will put the weight back on

LIGHT AS A FEATHER: Pauline Quirke, far left, before and, left, after her diet, which she revealed in Woman magazine, below



By Dr Ellie Cannon

When I saw the photos of Pauline Quirke showing off the results of her six-stone weight loss, I have to admit, I thought she looked great. But my heart sank when the Birds Of A Feather

actress admitted it was thanks to the LighterLife plan. For the uninitiated, this is the cult diet with more than 150,000 followers that claims to help obese, serial dieters shed huge amounts of weight in record time (Pauline did it in just six months). The company has an annual turnover of more than £20 million. It even has its own dedicated magazine.

But business success does not correlate to its effectiveness as a long-term obesity cure: you will lose weight on the programme, but I certainly question whether it can be maintained. With more and more of my patients struggling with expanding waistlines, and knowing the serious impact that can have on their physical health and life expectancy, I am frequently asked about diets. In my opinion, sustainable weight loss does not involve a crash diet or extreme exercise regime but a long-term, realistic change in lifestyle. Here are a few of the questions I am often asked in my surgery on the subject.

Q What is LighterLife and can it help me lose weight?

A LighterLife is medically termed as a very low-calorie diet (VLCD). All normal food is banned and replaced with food packs – fortified drinks, soups, desserts and bars – providing 530 calories daily. You follow this until you reach your weight-loss goal, at which point LighterLife gives you a tailor-made eating plan. Or as its phone operator told me: 'You can go back to your normal food.' Participants are also involved in group meetings for support, which can help with motivation.

There is no doubt that people lose weight on LighterLife and other meal-replacement equivalents. But there seems to be no independent data to prove how much of this is maintained. The health benefits do not come from transient weight loss but from long-term maintenance of a healthy waist measurement of less than 37 for men and 32 for women, and a body mass index (BMI) score – a ratio of height to weight used by medics to calculate a healthy weight for an individual – of under 25.

Q So do people regain the weight they lose on LighterLife?

A Yes. LighterLife publishes data on long-term effectiveness up to three years and the studies show that people do keep off a percentage of the weight, but even it admits that most keep off less than half what they originally lost. Considering that the programme was estab-

lished 15 years ago, the fact that they have followed people for such a short time after their initial weight loss makes me sceptical about longer-term results.

Q I've tried all sorts of diets but I can't keep the weight off. Why?

A Crash diets trigger a cycle of weight loss that is temporarily sustained, then rapidly regained until the next diet is started and the cycle starts over. In the early stages of starvation – which is essentially what these diets induce – the body cannibalises muscle as well as fat to provide energy not being gained via food, and this contributes to a dramatic weight loss.

In all crash diets, because the severe restriction is not sustainable, when a person starts eating normally again, the weight goes on quickly as fat. In 2007 an analysis of 31 clinical weight-loss studies (the biggest analysis ever carried out) found that more than two-thirds of dieters eventually put on more than they lost.

One study carried out by the University of California found that 83 per cent of people who lost ten per cent of their body weight within six months put on more than they lost two years later, while another showed that half of dieters put on an additional 11lb five years after coming off their diet.

Q Could crash-dieting alter my metabolism, making it slower?

A Contrary to common belief, yo-yo dieting has never been scientifi-

cally proven to be detrimental to physical health or to cause your metabolism to slow down. But it has damaging psychological effects of stress, depression and poor self-esteem.

The sustainability of the diet and weight loss is not a problem simply of LighterLife but of any programme that is extreme compared with an individual's normal lifestyle, including excessive exercise regimes that are the focus of many celebrity-exercise DVDs.

Q What about diet pills?

A A recent study found that the most common drug recommended for long-term use – orlistat, also known as Xenical or Alli – reduced weight by less than 11lb, equating to a loss of less than five per cent of total body weight. And with the tablets, there is no healthy change in lifestyle as you are relying on the medication to do the work. When patients stop taking them, weight is generally regained.

Q So what is the answer – how can I lose weight?

A There is no quick fix. In order to maintain a healthy BMI, any dietary changes must be realistic. The changes have to be viable



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on holiday, at work, when with the children, and so on. You need to imagine yourself continuing with any plan indefinitely.

The same goes for exercise. The novelty of pitching up at the gym four times a week soon wears off. Striking the happy medium of doing enough to make a difference, but also so it's practical in terms of your lifestyle, is the long-term answer. I'm a big fan of comedian Dawn French's approach – she recently lost three stone on a regime of regular walking and less-regular chocolate and chips.

Pauline has done well with her weight loss and she will be reaping the health benefits – hopefully avoiding problems with arthritis in her hips. I look forward to the follow-up piece in five years' time that shows she has kept the weight off.