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NEWSLETTER

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AUCKLAND
Bonedensity

Managing Bone Health

BISPHOSPHONATES AND OSTEONECROSIS OF THE JAW



Osteonecrosis of the jaw (ONJ) is a recently recognized, but poorly understood, dental condition that is associated with use of potent bisphosphonate therapy. Recent publicity about ONJ in the lay media in New Zealand, and ultra-conservative recommendations by North American dental authorities, have created uncertainty, and in some cases alarm, about the safety of bisphosphonates amongst patients, doctors and dentists. Specifically, some dentists are declining to proceed with dental work in patients who are receiving bisphosphonate therapy for non-malignant skeletal conditions such as osteoporosis and Paget's disease, and some patients are discontinuing effective therapy for osteoporosis because of concern about ONJ. In all clinical trials of oral alendronate, including more than 17,000 patients in total, there have been no reports of ONJ. These patient numbers include those with continuous therapy for 10 years, and those in pre-clinical trials where much higher than current alendronate doses were used.

The vast majority (approximately 95%) of cases of ONJ in patients receiving bisphosphonate therapy have occurred in oncology patients, who receive 10-12 times higher doses of these agents than patients with osteoporosis. ONJ may occur in about 5% of oncology patients receiving high-dose bisphosphonate therapy for management of skeletal complications of cancer. In contrast, the occurrence of ONJ in patients receiving bisphosphonate therapy for osteoporosis is estimated to be between 1 in 20,000 and 1 in 200,000 patients exposed to the drug.

We are concerned that the recommendations of expert groups such as the American Dental Association are misleading, because they fail to distinguish between the substantially different risks of ONJ in patients with cancer and those with osteoporosis. The excessively conservative advice runs the risk of patients already taking bisphosphonates not getting appropriate dental surgery when they need it, and patients with dental problems not being given treatments of proven efficacy for osteoporosis and Paget's disease.

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