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Vitamin D benefits limited against fractures: study

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By Gene Emery

BOSTON (Reuters) - If you're an older woman who pops calcium and vitamin D supplements, you may boost your protection against hip fractures but you also raise the risk of kidney stones, a study showed on Wednesday.

The study also showed no link between taking the supplements and the incidence of colon cancer.

Officially, the study of 36,282 women taking the supplements after menopause concluded that the treatment did not prevent broken bones of any kind. That was based on assessments of all the women who participated.

But about 20 percent of the volunteers did not take the tablets regularly, according to the report, to be published in Thursday's New England Journal of Medicine. The supplements seemed to cut the risk of a broken hip by 29 percent for those who stuck to the treatment over most of the seven-year study.

But they did not reduce the likelihood of spine, wrist or other types of fractures, and they increased the risk of kidney stones by 17 percent, according to the research.

Study leader Rebecca Jackson of Ohio State University told Reuters the findings show that for women over 60, when the risk of breaking a hip is greater, "there is some benefit in calcium and vitamin D" if she consistently takes the supplements.

But the researchers had hoped for a greater benefit. Americans spend an estimated \$993 million a year on calcium supplements to ward off osteoporosis, a disease in which bones become fragile and more likely to break.

MARKETING AND MISCONCEPTION

"With the widespread marketing of calcium and vitamin D, many women believe that they are completely protected against the development of osteoporosis if they are taking these supplements," said Joel Finkelstein of the Massachusetts General Hospital.

"This study should help correct this important misconception and allow more women to receive optimal therapy for bone health," he said in an editorial in the journal.

In the study, half of the volunteers received 1,000 milligrams of calcium carbonate along with 400 international units of vitamin D. The rest took placebos.

The researchers estimated that 5,045 women over age 50 should be treated to prevent one hip fracture each year. "This number would be reduced to 1,914 among women over age 60 years, who are at higher absolute risk for hip fracture," they said.

Finkelstein said it is possible "that calcium with vitamin D supplementation would be more effective in a population of women with osteoporosis."

The cancer research, also done under the auspices of the Women's Health Initiative, found that after seven years of treatment, it made no difference whether women got placebos or a combination of calcium and vitamin D when it came to the likelihood of developing colon cancer.

But the research team led by Jean Wactawski-Wende of the University at Buffalo in New York said the dose may have been too low or volunteers may not have gotten the supplements long enough, given the slow growth of colon cancer tumors.

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