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April 2012

Ocular Side Effects of bisphosphonate therapy

Inflammation of the eye has been reported previously with bisphosphonates. These reports were a small series of patients or single patient case reports. Yesterday the results of a large Canadian study were published evaluating the risk of inflammation of the eye with bisphosphonates. This study was based on electronic healthcare data routinely collected on all British Columbia residents and the results need to be interpreted with caution as this type of study does not prove that the bisphosphonates actually cause the eye inflammation.

The authors, Dr Etminan and colleagues, reviewed the electronic records for specific diagnoses and medications in all British Columbia residents seen by an eye doctor from 2000 to 2007. Uveitis or inflammation of the middle layer of the eye occurred in 29/10,000 person-years in people using bisphosphonates for the first time whereas in those not on these medications the rate of developing uveitis was 20/10,000. Uveitis presents with blurred vision, eye pain and redness. Episcleritits or inflammation of the white part of the eye (sclera) occurred in 63/10,000 users of bisphosphonates and 36/10,000 non-users. This condition presents with eye pain, redness, tearing and light sensitivity.

These numbers are very small and these conditions are fortunately quite rare. If however your doctor has asked you to take bisphosphonates then it is necessary for you to report any signs of eye inflammation to your physician. The low risk of eye inflammation needs to be considered along with the large benefit in fracture risk reduction that bisphosphonates offer. Early reporting of any features of eye inflammation is advised and is best discussed with your physician.