A survey of New Zealand women’s beliefs about osteoporosis

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Background – Osteoporosis is a disease which places considerable burden on the health budget, and brings pain, disability and possibly death to those in whom it develops. As it is essentially incurable, a preventative public health approach is required. Perceptions of personal susceptibility, belief in the seriousness of the disease and in the efficacy of recommended risk reducing behaviours have been shown to be critical in bringing about behavioural change.

Objective – To investigate the attitudes and knowledge of New Zealand women towards osteoporosis risk factors and risk reduction.

Design – A descriptive, web-based survey was completed by 622 Auckland women between the ages of 20 and 49 years. Two validated questionnaires measured levels of knowledge about osteoporosis and preventative behaviours, and perceptions of personal susceptibility and seriousness of the disease. Subjects were recruited by email and the sample was opportunistic.

Outcomes – The subjects reported higher than average educational attainment, and were well motivated to take care of their health. However, over 60% of the women denied feeling any susceptibility to osteoporosis, and 78% did not believe the disease to be crippling. Although most women (90%) agreed that a diet low in calcium increased the risk, 77% thought that calcium-rich foods contained too much cholesterol and 87% did not feel good about eating calcium-containing foods.

Conclusion – The findings of this study suggest that public health strategies aimed at increasing osteoporosis-preventing behaviours in pre-menopausal women should address attitudes about personal susceptibility and the seriousness of the disease. Further research into the opinions of women about the cholesterol content of calcium-rich foods would be valuable.