Vertebral Fracture and Bone Mineral Density in Women Receiving High Dose Glucocorticoids for Treatment of Autoimmune Diseases

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ABSTRACT. ***Objective.*** To evaluate the factors influencing the occurrence of vertebral fracture in patients receiving high dose glucocorticoids (GC).

Methods. A cross-sectional study was performed on women who had received at least 0.5 mg/kg of oral glucocorticoid for the treatment of autoimmune diseases for more than 1 month between 1998 and 2003. Logistic regression analysis and chi-square test were used to examine the effects of glucocorticoid dose and other factors on vertebral fractures. Receiver-operating characteristics curve (ROC) analysis was used to determine the bone mineral density (BMD) cutoff value for the risk of vertebral fracture.

Results. The study population comprised 160 women, including 35 with vertebral fractures. In ROC analysis, the BMD threshold of the risk of fracture for postmenopausal women (0.787 g/cm^2, T score –2.1) was lower than that for premenopausal women (0.843 g/cm^2, T score –1.7). Among patients with fractures, 7 of 16 premenopausal patients had normal BMD values (T score > –1), whereas only one of 19 postmenopausal patients showed a comparable level of BMD. Additionally, vertebral fracture was more frequent for patients with high total cholesterol values (> 280 mg/dl) than for those with normal total cholesterol values (< 220 mg/dl). Moreover, patients with high total cholesterol values had lower BMD values than those with normal total cholesterol values.

Conclusion. The fact that vertebral fracture frequently occurred in premenopausal patients with normal BMD and evidence that hyperlipidemia correlated with fracture suggest the pathology of vertebral fracture secondary to high dose glucocorticoid therapy is multifactorial and possibly involves lipid metabolism. (J Rheumatol 2005;32:863–9)

Key Indexing Terms:

OSTEOPOROSIS	VERTEBRAL FRACTURE	GLUCOCORTICOID
MENOPAUSE	BONE MINERAL DENSITY	HYPERLIPIDEMIA

Glucocorticoids are widely used for the treatment of a variety of autoimmune diseases. Even now, when various novel drugs for the treatment of these diseases are being introduced, glucocorticoids remain the main drugs of choice. However, it has been well established that the use of glucocorticoids can lead to rapid loss of bone mineral density

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(BMD) and to an increased risk of fracture[1]. Several epidemiologic studies have reported a doubling of the risk of hip fracture for users of glucocorticoids[2-4], while large-scale studies have demonstrated a rapid increase in fracture risk following the start of glucocorticoid therapy and a strong correlation of risk with daily glucocorticoid dose[4,5]. Other smaller studies have shown that the cumulative dose, rather than the daily dose, was the more reliable and accurate predictor of fracture[6,7]. When high dose glucocorticoids are used, the loss of bone such as vertebrae can be rapid and lead to vertebral compression fractures within a few months.

Glucocorticoids are also known to affect bone through various pathways, affecting mainly bone formation and, to a lesser extent, bone resorption[8,9]. Findings have been accumulating about the possible role of micro-architectural changes in glucocorticoid induced fracture, although fracture in glucocorticoid users may also occur simply as a result of bone loss. A recent hypothesis is that osteocyte apoptosis is an important factor in deterioration of bone quality and the concomitant rapid increase in the risk of fracture[10]. In addition, there is a report that glucocorticoid users with fracture had considerably higher BMD than patients with fracture due to primary osteoporosis[11]. These reports support the notion that a non-BMD-related mechanism may also be responsible for inducing fracture in users of glucocorticoids[12].

We conducted a multicenter, cross-sectional analysis, specifically investigating high dose glucocorticoid users treated for autoimmune diseases, to determine the BMD cutoff value for the risk of vertebral fracture, and to examine the correlation between glucocorticoid induced vertebral fracture or loss of BMD and multiple factors including menopause, glucocorticoid dose, and other glucocorticoid induced secondary complications.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study population of glucocorticoid users. Data on 160 Japanese women, aged 16–85 years and treated with glucocorticoids for autoimmune diseases, were collected from the rheumatology departments of 11 institutions that joined the Research Committee for Glucocorticoid-Induced Osteoporosis organized by the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare. This study was limited to patients who had been receiving oral glucocorticoid therapy (mean daily dose 0.5 mg/kg prednisone or equivalent) for at least 1 month between April 1998 and March 2003. The basic clinical data including risk factors and dose and duration of glucocorticoid therapy were collected retrospectively by treating physicians in reference to medical records from each institution, and the collected data were reviewed by the central committee for selecting eligible patients. As for treatment or prevention of osteoporosis, there were no restrictions for enrollment of patients based on protocols for the use of bisphosphonates, calcium, vitamin D, or other antiresorptive drugs. Diseases they were treated for included systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE; 79 cases), Sjögren's syndrome (15 cases), polymyositis (13 cases), mixed connective tissue disease (12 cases), adult onset Still's disease (8 cases), polymyalgia rheumatica (7 cases), dermatomyositis (6 cases), systemic sclerosis (5 cases), and others (15 cases). Patients with rheumatoid arthritis were excluded from this study.

BMD of the patients was assessed for the lumbar spine (L2–L4), femoral neck, and radial head by means of dual-energy x-ray absorptiometry (DEXA). Since the DEXA machines used for the measurement of BMD differed from hospital to hospital, the raw BMD values were converted to comparable values for the QDR-2000 (Hologic Inc., Waltham, MA, USA) as described[13]. High dose glucocorticoid therapy was defined as a mean daily dose > 0.5 mg/kg of prednisone or equivalent dose of other glucocorticoids for at least 1 month.

Vertebral fracture was confirmed radiologically by lateral radiographs of the thoracolumbar spine with the method established by Orimo, *et al*[14]; the presence of vertebral fracture was semiquantitatively confirmed if either the ratio of middle/anterior or middle/posterior height of a vertebral body was < 0.8, or the ratio of anterior/posterior height of a vertebral body was < 0.75. The judgment of fracture was double-checked by 2 examiners in each institution. If BMD was measured more than once in the same patient, the last BMD value was adopted for patients without vertebral fracture, and for patients with fracture, the BMD measured at the timepoint nearest the radiological confirmation of initial vertebral fracture was used.

The daily, cumulative, and maximum glucocorticoid doses, and the total duration (in days) of prior glucocorticoid therapy were also entered into the analysis. Clinical factors that may affect the occurrence of vertebral fracture, comprising age, body mass index (BMI), menopause, BMD (T scores), hypertension, total cholesterol, and HbA1c were evaluated. Diagnoses for hypertension and diabetes mellitus were determined according to American Heart Association[15] and American Diabetes Association[16] guidelines, respectively. Hyperlipidemia was diagnosed according to the criteria of the Japanese Atherosclerosis Society[17], in which total cholesterol level > 220 mg/dl is regarded as hyperlipidemia.

Statistical analysis. Logistic regression analysis was used to calculate the influence of various variables on vertebral fracture including age, BMI, menopause, BMD, and glucocorticoid related parameters. For determination of BMD cutoff values to identify women with vertebral fracture, sensitivity, specificity, and BMD cutoff values were calculated using receiver-operating characteristics curve (ROC) analysis. As for patients with vertebral fracture, the chi-square test was used to determine the difference in BMD between premenopausal and postmenopausal glucocorticoid users. P values < 0.05 were deemed to be statistically significant. The MedCalc statistical analysis software package (MedCalc Software, Mariakerke, Belgium) was used for statistical analyses.

RESULTS

Variables affecting vertebral fracture in high dose glucocorticoid users. For this study, 160 patients were assessed. The baseline information of enrolled patients is shown in Table 1. BMD values of this group negatively correlated with patients' age ($p < 0.001$, $r = -0.366$). A logistic regression analysis of patients with vertebral fracture (fracture group) and those without vertebral fracture (non-fracture group) is presented in Table 2. The respective mean BMD values of the fracture group (35 cases; 19 postmenopausal, 16 premenopausal) and the non-fracture group (125 cases) were 0.781 and 0.871 g/cm^2 ($p = 0.004$). There was a significant difference between the 2 groups in BMI and BMD, but no difference in age, ratio of menopause, and total glucocorticoid dose, as shown in Table 2. The logistic regression analyses including the other glucocorticoid related variables such as cumulative days of glucocorticoid use, mean glucocorticoid dose (daily), cumulative glucocorticoid dose, and maximal glucocorticoid dose showed no significant difference between the 2 groups (data not shown). The mean daily glucocorticoid dose for premenopausal women (age 34.9 ± 9.4 yrs) was 16.4 ± 16.5 mg/day and for postmenopausal

Table 1. Baseline characteristics of 160 patients in the study.

	Premenopausal	Postmenopausal	Total	p
Age, yrs, mean ± SD	34.9 ± 9.4	62.6 ± 9.9	47.9 ± 16.9	< 0.05
BMI, kg/m^2	21.7 ± 14.1	22.0 ± 3.5	21.9 ± 3.6	NS
BMD, g/cm^2	0.926 ± 0.149	0.767 ± 0.149	0.852 ± 0.168	< 0.05
Daily prednisolone dose*, mg/day	16.4 ± 16.5	10.7 ± 9.9	13.7 ± 14.1	< 0.05
Cumulative dose of prednisolone*, g	17.1 ± 31.3	8.2 ± 10.4	12.8 ± 24.0	NS
Duration of glucocorticoid treatment, days	1993.1 ± 2091.9	2069.9 ± 2317.4	2027.8 ± 2189.4	NS

* Adjusted to the dose equivalent to prednisolone. NS: not significant.

Table 2. Logistic regression analysis of treatment related variables and vertebral fracture in high dose user of glucocorticoid.

	Vertebral Fracture			
	Yes	No	Z	p
Age, yrs, mean ± SD	50.7 ± 3.2*	47.1 ± 1.4	0.5925	0.554
Menopause (%)	19/35 (54.3)	56/125 (44.8)	0.270	0.787
BMI	22.4 ± 0.8	21.8 ± 0.3	1.961	< 0.05
BMD, L2–4, g/cm^2	0.781 ± 0.033	0.871 ± 0.014	2.218	< 0.03
Total glucocorticoid dose*, g	24.3 ± 6.6	22.2 ± 4.4	0.789	0.430

* Adjusted to the dose equivalent to prednisolone.

women (age 62.6 ± 9.9 yrs) 10.7 ± 9.9 mg/day ($p < 0.05$). Compared to postmenopausal glucocorticoid users, premenopausal glucocorticoid users had significantly higher average BMD (L2–L4) in the lumbar spine, femoral neck, and radial head (data not shown).

For postmenopausal women, the mean BMD value of the fracture group was significantly lower than that of the non-fracture group ($p < 0.01$), as shown in Figure 1. In contrast, there was no significant difference in BMD values between the fracture group and non-fracture group among premenopausal women. Of special interest is that 7 of the 16 premenopausal patients (43.7%) in the fracture group showed normal values (T score > –1), whereas only one of the 19 postmenopausal patients (5.3%) did ($p < 0.01$). There was no statistically significant difference between the fracture group and non-fracture group for maximum glucocorti-

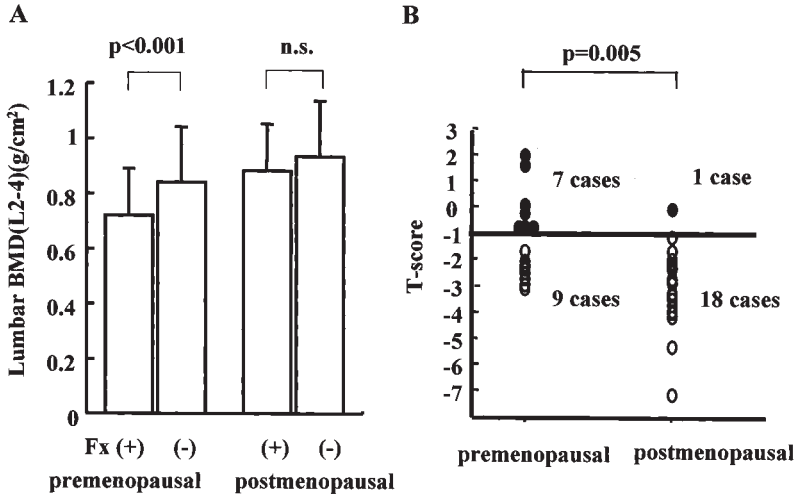

Figure 1. (A) Lumbar BMD from fracture (Fx) and non-fracture patient groups taking high dose glucocorticoids. There were significant differences in lumbar BMD between fracture and non-fracture groups in premenopausal women ($p < 0.001$), whereas no difference was detected between the 2 groups in postmenopausal women. ns: not significant. (B) T scores from premenopausal or postmenopausal women with vertebral fracture. Premenopausal glucocorticoid users frequently incurred vertebral fracture even when BMD was not reduced (T > –1) compared with postmenopausal women ($p = 0.005$). ●: fracture patients whose T scores were not reduced.

coid dose, mean daily glucocorticoid dose, disease background, and history of methylprednisolone pulse therapy in premenopausal women (data not shown).

BMD cutoff values for vertebral fracture in glucocorticoid users assessed by ROC analysis. ROC analysis was used to determine the BMD cutoff level for vertebral fracture in high dose glucocorticoid users. The cutoff values were defined as the values that proved to be effective for the sensitive and specific differentiation of subjects with and without vertebral fracture. As shown in Figure 2, the cutoff values for the risk of vertebral fracture for premenopausal, postmenopausal, and total patients were 0.843, 0.787, and 0.787 g/cm^2, respectively.

Hyperlipidemia correlates with BMD value and vertebral fracture. The influence of common glucocorticoid induced complications such as hyperlipidemia, diabetes mellitus, and hypertension on vertebral fracture were not entered into the logistic regression analysis, since those variables are not recognized as independent to glucocorticoid dose-related variables. Table 3 shows that hyperlipidemia has negative correlation with BMD, while HbA1c level did not correlate with BMD values. Nor did hypertension correlate with the level of BMD (data not shown). Then we compared patients with normal total cholesterol (< 220 mg/dl) value to those with above-normal values for further analysis. The peak value of total cholesterol after initiation of glucocorticoid therapy was used for the analysis in each patient. When we raised the comparative total cholesterol level to > 280 mg/dl, patients with high total cholesterol (> 280 mg/dl) value had lower BMD (p = 0.016) and higher risk of vertebral fracture (relative risk 3.1, p = 0.032) than those with normal total cholesterol level (Figure 3). These results suggest that hyperlipidemia following high dose glucocorticoid therapy may contribute to the risk for BMD reduction and vertebral fracture.

DISCUSSION

High dose glucocorticoid therapy is often the first choice for patients with autoimmune diseases, such as SLE, that frequently affect premenopausal women. Although the efficacy of bisphosphonate has recently been reported in high dose glucocorticoid users[18], there is only limited knowledge of the clinical risk factors for secondary osteoporosis occurring in high dose glucocorticoid users. This is the first extensive study focusing on the relationship of vertebral fracture and BMD in patients with high dose glucocorticoid therapy. We observed unique effects of high dose glucocorticoid therapy: First, the BMD cutoff value for the risk of vertebral fracture applicable to premenopausal glucocorticoid users was higher than that applicable to postmenopausal glucocorticoid users. Second, premenopausal glucocorticoid users, even with normal BMD values, were found to frequently incur vertebral fracture. Third, hyperlipidemia significantly correlated with vertebral fracture and low BMD.

ROC analysis showed that the BMD cutoff value for the risk of vertebral fracture for premenopausal women was 0.843 (T score = –1.7) and for postmenopausal women 0.787 (T score = –2.1). These cutoff values lie between 70% (T score = –2.6) and 80% (T score = –1.7) of the young adult

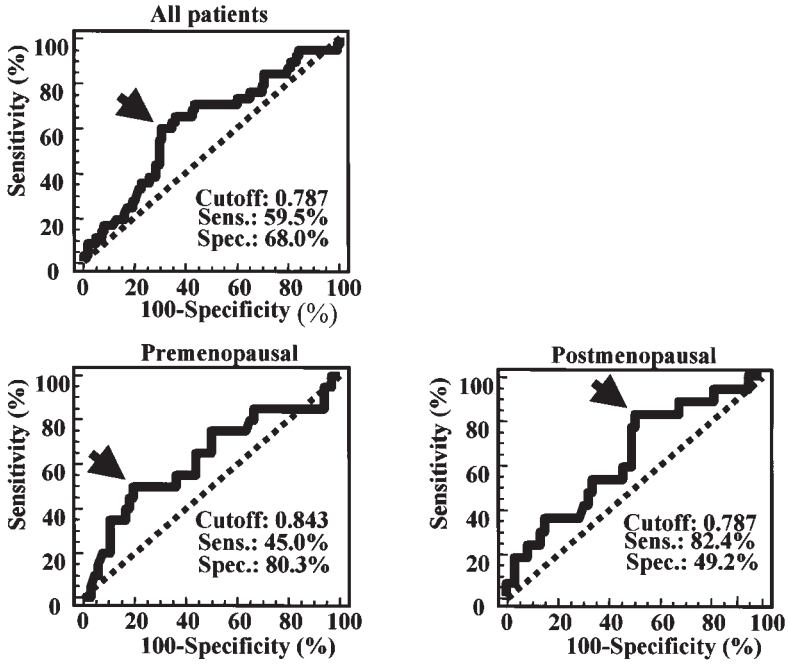

Figure 2. ROC analysis of lumbar BMD values for all patients, premenopausal and postmenopausal patients with vertebral fracture treated with high dose glucocorticoid. Arrows indicate cutoff points. Sens: sensitivity; Spec: specificity.

Table 3. The relationship between other glucocorticoid related complications and BMD or vertebral fracture in high dose glucocorticoid users (chi-square test).

Vertebral Fracture	Yes	No	p
Diabetes mellitus	26	134	
HbA1c, mg/dl*	7.68 ± 1.93	5.15 ± 0.66	< 0.01
BMD, g/cm^2	0.858 ± 0.149	0.850 ± 0.17	NS
Vertebral fracture, yes/no (%)	5/21 (19.2)	29/105 (21.6)	NS
Hyperlipidemia (cases)	95	65	
Total cholesterol, mg/dl*	283.2 ± 54.8	207.8 ± 23.0	< 0.01
BMD, g/cm^2	0.834 ± 0.176	0.876 ± 0.173	0.03
Vertebral fracture, yes/no (%)	23/72 (24.2)	11/54 (16.9)	NS

* Peak values after glucocorticoid therapy are shown. Patients whose value was > 220 mg/dl was defined to have hyperlipidemia. NS: not significant.

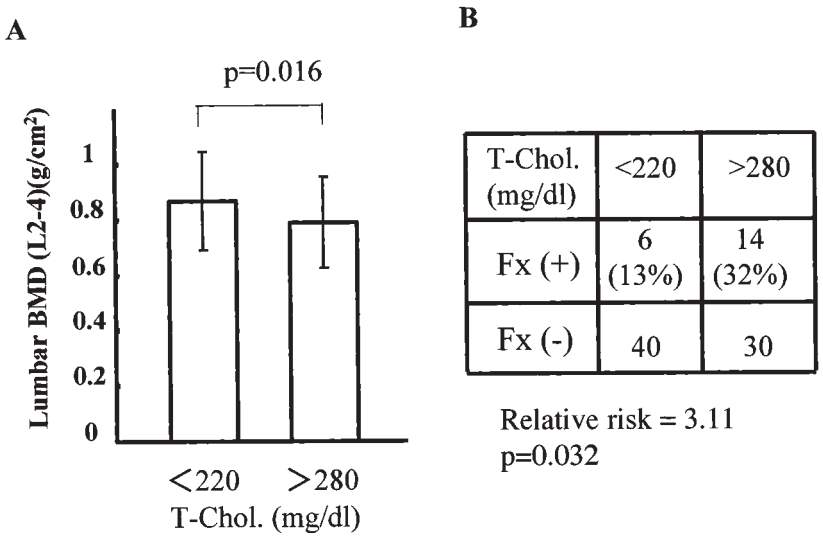

Figure 3. Influence of hyperlipidemia on lumbar BMD and vertebral fracture (Fx) in high dose glucocorticoid users. (A) Comparison of lumbar BMD between patients with high (> 280 mg/dl) and with normal (< 220 mg/dl) total cholesterol (T-Chol) values. (B) Comparison of the ratio of vertebral fracture between patients with high (> 280 mg/dl) and with normal (< 220 mg/dl) total cholesterol values. Chi-square analysis revealed that vertebral fracture was more frequent in patients with high total cholesterol level than in those with normal level (relative risk = 3.11, p = 0.032).

mean value of a large-scale Japanese study of primary osteoporosis by Orimo, *et al*, in which the cutoff value for osteoporosis was determined to be 70% of young adult mean[14]. There have been arguments about the difference of BMD threshold for fractures between postmenopausal users of glucocorticoids and nonusers. There are reports showing the BMD distribution of patients with vertebral fractures was similar for glucocorticoid users and nonusers[19,20]. On the other hand, other studies found that postmenopausal women taking glucocorticoids had a higher risk of fracture compared with nonusers, even at comparable levels of BMD[11,21]. Although our study was not designed to address this controversy, the relatively high BMD cutoff value, 80% of the young adult mean, for premenopausal women established in our study suggests that BMD alone may not be sufficient for predicting the risk of vertebral fracture for premenopausal users of glucocorticoids.

This notion is supported by our finding that premenopausal glucocorticoid users frequently experienced complications of vertebral fracture even when they registered normal BMD values. Vertebral fracture was seen in as many as 43% of premenopausal glucocorticoid users even when their BMD values were not particularly low (T score > –1). Recent guidelines from Europe and North America have been developed to establish intervention thresholds for glucocorticoid induced osteoporosis in patients with high BMD levels[22,23] or regardless of BMD level[24]. The recent guidelines of the American College of Rheumatology advocate intervention for all patients whose therapy calls for use of > 5 mg/day glucocorticoid for at least 3 months, and for

patients on a longterm glucocorticoid regimen with a BMD below a T score of –1.0[22]. Guidelines from the UK advocate an intervention threshold at a T score of –1.5 for patients who are scheduled to be given > 7.5 mg/day glucocorticoid for at least 6 months[23]. Our results suggest the need for developing a new therapeutic approach to prevent glucocorticoid induced osteoporosis in addition to starting antiresorptive therapy at high BMD thresholds.

Accumulating findings indicate that BMD is not the only factor that affects the risk of vertebral fracture[1,12,25]. One mechanism for the rapid onset of fracture risk could be osteocyte apoptosis, which leads to a deterioration of bone quality and a rapid increase in fracture risk[10]. Osteocyte apoptosis is prevalent in glucocorticoid induced osteoporosis[26]. The network of osteocytes is thought to detect microdamage to bone and be involved in bone repair remodeling. Therefore, osteocyte apoptosis together with glucocorticoid induced suppression of osteoblast generation could lead to growing micro-damage and a resultant increase in bone fragility. Thus, it is important to develop a new method to estimate bone fragility besides BMD measurement.

Another candidate factor that may contribute to the risk of osteoporosis from our study is hyperlipidemia. Our results showed that high total cholesterol (> 280 mg/dl) may be a risk factor for low BMD and vertebral fracture. There are reports of *in vitro* studies suggesting that low density lipoprotein oxidation products could promote osteoporosis by inhibiting osteoblast differentiation and by directing progenitor marrow stroma cells to undergo adipogenic instead of osteogenic differentiation[27,28]. Although these *in vitro* studies imply the possible involvement of lipid metabolism in the process of osteoporosis, there has been no report confirming the relationship of hyperlipidemia and glucocorticoid induced osteoporosis, and many clinical trials examining the efficacy of HMG-CoA reductase in preventing osteoporosis have had negative results. Therefore, further investigation is needed to establish a therapeutic strategy for preventing glucocorticoid induced osteoporosis in patients with hyperlipidemia.

Some reports stress the importance of daily glucocorticoid dose (mean) over cumulative glucocorticoid dose as an effective predictor of fracture[4,5,11], while others stress cumulative rather than daily glucocorticoid dose[6,7]. We detected no statistically significant difference between the occurrence of fracture and the mean daily glucocorticoid dose ($p = 0.483$) or cumulative glucocorticoid dose ($p = 0.794$), probably because of the limitation of our cross-sectional study and the limited numbers of patients with fracture. An important factor affecting our results may be differences in the use of antiresorptive drugs, especially bisphosphonates. This may be due partly to the Japanese legislative environment, since prophylactic use of drugs has not been allowed yet in the Japanese health insurance system. As this is a cross-sectional study, there are some limitations to interpreting our results. The onset of vertebral fracture is not predictable in prevalent fracture cases, and in these cases the influence of BMD may be different from that in incident fracture cases. To address these questions, we are now conducting a randomized cohort trial on patients who start glucocorticoid administration at a high dose, > 0.5 mg/kg.

Our findings support the hypothesis that treatment with glucocorticoids influences the occurrence of vertebral fracture by means of a mechanism independent of BMD. Moreover, it will be necessary to develop a new approach to assess and reduce the risk of vertebral fracture in premenopausal users of glucocorticoids.

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