

Ep #265: An Ayurvedic Approach to Osteoporosis with Mona Warner



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Susi Hately

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Male Announcer: You're listening to *From Pain to Possibility* with Susi Hatelly. You will hear Susi's best ideas on how to reduce or even eradicate your pain and learn how to listen to your body when it whispers so you don't have to hear it scream. And now here's your host, Susi Hatelly.

Susi: Welcome and welcome back. I am so glad that you're here because I've got Mona Warner back, and Mona Warner is an Ayurvedic doctor. She also works inside of my certification program. Mona and I go way, way, way, way back. So I've known Mona for a very, very long time.

Mona is very steeped in the way that I think about a lot of things related to recovery and movement and health in general. And she's a part of the team who is putting on the yoga and osteoporosis program that's coming up. And the reason I brought her into this podcast series is so that you can just hear the view from an Ayurvedic on osteoporosis.

As I've said in previous episodes, there's a lot of fear out there, and rightly so. And my hope with this episode and with the program that we're running is that we can kind of get out of a fear space and into a possibility space where there is change that is possible. All of the folks that are involved in this program have seen people who've had osteoporosis improve in their bone health.

And we want to be kind of voices in the space about possibilities. And Ayurveda has a great view on how that might be. So Mona, welcome. I'm so glad you're here.

Mona: Thank you for having me. It's a joy to be back.

Susi: Awesome. So when we're thinking about osteoporosis from an Ayurvedic perspective, how do the Ayurvedas perceive osteoporosis?

Mona: So from an Ayurvedic perspective, osteoporosis is very much like in conventional perspective, it is a depletion or a degradation of the bone tissue. So that part everybody agrees on. In a way that part is straightforward. Where the perspective might differ a little bit is why. Why is

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the bone tissue depleting or degrading or losing its strength and its structure?

And so from the Ayurvedic perspective, we have our own view based in our own context. So we tend to look a lot at the effect of digestion on tissue development, and how are we able to support digestion in order to support tissue development so that we can rebuild the tissues that need rebuilding in a way that promotes and creates more integrity?

And then we also have what is the unique feature of Ayurveda is the doshic perspective. So how the organizing energies of the body are affecting the different tissues and structures. These doshas are both functional units, however, when aggravated they can cause challenges.

And so we would do both, supporting through digestive health in order to be able to build healthy tissue. And often that digestive health is affected by these doshas, or these organizing energies or organizing principles. And so there's one in particular that's a little guiltier than the others sometimes. And so we would look at how we would manage that in order to promote an overall systemic stability. And then this, of course, helps us in terms of stabilizing everything in the system.

Susi: There's a lot to unpack there. So let's start with digestion building tissue. Say more about that.

Mona: Yeah. So from the Vedic perspective, this is not only the Ayurvedic perspective, but includes the yogic perspective, each human being is the microcosm or a small holographic copy of the bigger universe, the macrocosm. And the center of our universe, so to speak, is the sun, right? This amazing ball of fire and everything revolves and spins around it.

And so from the microcosmic, or the individual perspective, we all also have an inner sun that resides in the area of the solar plexus. Even our modern colloquial language follows that theme. And from an Ayurvedic perspective, this inner sun is known as the Agni or the digestive potential.

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Now, I think most people would get that you eat food, it digests, and then the components of that food are used to rebuild your system. And in Ayurveda, we believe this is the foundation of stability and health. Our ability to digest the food, to break it down into the component parts that the body can then use to rebuild all of our tissues from the inside out is paramount to health because it's paramount to tissue health.

And so if we want to have strong and stable and functional tissues, we actually need to have a strong and stable and functional digestion in order to be able to constantly regenerate and replenish these tissues. And that's one of the things about being a human organism in the world that we live in, is these bodies, if we don't maintain our tissue development, they degrade.

And we see that. There are a whole host of degenerative diseases. And now our digestive system's ability to maintain its strength and stability changes and fluctuates over time and in different contexts. So there are a lot of ways and a lot of reasons where our digestion can become variable or impaired in some way. And it can be everything from getting sick, having a fever, catching a cold will affect your digestion. And you'll notice that when you get any of those things, your hunger changes, right?

So our hunger is related to this digestion, to this agni, to this inner sun of our inner universe, right? And so where our appetite changes if we've been sick, where there's a lot of stress or a lot of strong emotions or a lot of intensity, maybe it's a lot of load, there's a lot going on, all of these factors in our environment affect us because we're part of the environment. We're a factor. And so all of these things can affect our digestion.

And it's the same with aging, different stages of life will have different influences on our different systems. So an example would be when you're a teenager with all the hormones going on, you pretty much digest so many things, right? Because your body is in a mode of building itself to become a mature body, to become a mature human. And as such, your body will do everything to extract every single bit of nutrition from anything you consume, right?

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But then when we stop being in that growth phase and we're more in the maintenance phase, all of a sudden our hunger levels change, our digestion changes. And people will express that. They'll say, oh, wow, when I was this age, I used to be able to eat anything. And now it's different, you know, things have changed.

And so part of the Ayurvedic science is that there are some changes that are predictable. And it doesn't mean that we can't work with that, and that we can't influence or, in some cases, improve the digestion.

And in improving or shifting or stabilizing the digestion, harmonizing the digestion, we can then affect the output, which is how we are building our tissues? What is the quantity? What is the quality? What is the stability of these tissues?

And so from the Ayurvedic perspective, everything revolves around this inner sun of digestion because so much of the output of digestion is everything we need in order to feel strong and healthy and capable and to have the bodies that will enable us to live the lives that we want to live.

So from an osteoporosis perspective or an osteo perspective, in order to build strong, healthy bone tissue, we need to have a digestion that can actually digest the food so we can extract the nutrients so that we can build those tissues.

And in some cases it involves eating more specifically for that tissue. And in some cases it simply involves supporting the digestion, because it's not only the osteo or the bone tissue that is affected sometimes. Sometimes we have a whole bunch of different tissues that are affected, and the bone is one of them.

So in Ayurveda, we have a strong focus on working with the digestion, and then working with the nourishment so that we can support people in building healthy, strong, robust tissues, a good quantity, a good quality, and a good stability.

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Susi: So now add in the bit around doshas and doshic energy. And the reason for this is people who are listening generally have an idea of Ayurveda. And if it's a beginning view of Ayurveda, we see all the dosha quizzes that are out there. And so people then can say I'm Vata, Pitta, whatever, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, right?

So there's a distinction, though, between those quizzes and then the energy that you're speaking of. And can you unpack that a little bit, and then bring it back to the osteoporosis piece? Because I think this will be a unique way of looking at it.

Mona: Yeah, absolutely. So when it comes to this idea of doshas, there are a couple of different lenses that we're looking at dosha through. So first, we want to look at doshas generally. And doshas are these energetic factors that help to organize the five elements that make up everything in the world of form.

So at their essence, doshas are organizing energies for space, which includes the space in which everything exists, for air, which is, again, breath and energy and moving parts like movement, for fire, which is transformation metabolism –

Oh, air is also gasses, right? So if we think about the five elements, sometimes we get stuck thinking it's really specific. But if we think about the periodic table of elements, right, which is sort of like our modern, we drilled down a little bit deeper into the five elements, we have solids, we have liquids, we have gas, like we have all these different components, we've simply sort of zoomed in on sometimes it's hydrogen, sometimes it's oxygen.

So in Ayurveda, because they didn't have the tools to drill down, they have a bit of a more zoomed out perspective which, again, a unique feature of Ayurveda is our ability to zoom out and look at a whole system, a whole person, a whole environment, a whole universe, as opposed to drilling down and only looking at one piece. Not that that's an incorrect

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perspective, and sometimes we do that as well. But in Ayurveda, we're constantly stepping back, stepping back, zooming out.

So these doshas, organizing energies of the elements. So we have these energies that are organizing the space, the air or the gasses, the fire, right, the metabolism, the transformation, the liquids and the solids, right? So the water and the earth element.

And the organization of these components are really important, because the theory from a Vedic perspective is everything in the world is made up of these five categories of matter, but not everything in the universe has the same amount of all the things, right?

Some things are more solid. Some things are more liquid. Some things are warmer. Some things are cooler. Some things are more gaseous. Some things are more spacious. And so what coordinates and organizes all of this? It is said that the doshas have this role.

And then when we bring it down to the individual level in these dosha quizzes, it's people trying to figure out how much air, how much earth, how much space, how much fire, how much water do I have in me, right? What is my makeup? And that individual constitutional model is often what the quizzes are quizzing for. And it's fun, who doesn't like to do a quiz? I think a lot of us grew up with Cosmo. You know, do the quiz every month. It's fun, figure out something. And so there's that component.

However, doshas are more than that, right? So once we look at this concept of doshas inside of an organism, then what we're looking at is not only the amount of earth and water and fire and air and space, and the reason why they're called organizing energies is because they're responsible for certain functions. And so certain tissues are governed by certain organizing energies. Certain functions are governed, or certain systems we could say, are governed by certain of these energies.

And so an example would be something like the vata dosha, and it's the organizing energy that coordinates space and movement and air element,

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governs the nervous system. And then we could say something like the kapha dosha, the one that governs earth and water, it governs the respiratory system, right? Like this whole heart and lung complex that's happening.

So each of these doshas has different functions. And so they're not only organizing energies of matter, but they're functional units within the universe, and therefore within the microcosm of the individual.

So with that, we have this individuality that we see through people's individual constitution. Some people have more earth. Some people have more water. Some people are more fiery. Some people are more airy. Some people are more spacey. And this accounts for why different people have different experiences, despite the fact we're all human beings.

So we have the shared experience of being human, but we're not the same human. And even beyond that, our elemental composition can create predisposition. And it can be a predisposition to stability. So we might have a superpower that comes from our elemental composition. And that elemental composition can also create a predisposition towards something being a little wobbly, right?

So everything has its superpower and everything has its blind spot, right? So we have all of that included in it. So understanding people's individual constitution can help us to see where we might need to shore things up, but also where the strengths lie, which is really great.

Then when we think about these doshas as functional units, that means everybody has all the doshas because we all need to have the same functions. We all need a cardiovascular system. We all need a nervous system. We all need a respiratory system. We all need a urinary system, which is the system that governs the water, right? We all need a digestive system. We all need all of these functional components that allow the organism to survive, to sustain, to operate, to function.

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So doshas are integrated in all of this. So you can probably tell at this point from an Ayurvedic perspective like, wow, doshas everywhere and in everything. And so it's a huge part of our lens. It's a huge part of our perspective.

So if I take all that and then I loop it around to take that lens and look at osteoporosis, what do I see? So what I see is there's one particular dosha, the vata dosha. It's the one that governs the air and the space element. The vata dosha has an affinity and tends to be very much related to the bone tissue, to the skeletal system.

And each dosha has particular qualities. For better or for worse, they have particular qualities. And it's how we're able to identify these organizing energies, which are very subtle. You don't see them with your eyes, but you experience them in your felt sense and you experience their function.

So vata dosha is mobile and she's light and she's cool and she's clear and she's subtle, but she also has a hardness to her. And that hardness is to our advantage from a skeletal bone tissue perspective. That's like the part of vata that we're like, yay, vata and the bone tissue. Let's have that tissue be nice and hard and solid and firm.

However, when things change, either in terms of availability of nutrients to build this tissue, or in terms of the amount of dosha in the body, Ayurveda is very much about Goldilocks. We don't want anything to be too hard or too soft. We're looking for just right. We don't want anything to be too hot, too cold. We're looking for just right. And just right is another way of saying homeostasis. It's another way of saying balance, harmony, equilibrium in the system.

So these doshas, being subtle, are very sensitive and it doesn't always take much to start increasing the amount of that energy in the body. And a little amount of increase happens to everyone all the time. Not a big deal. Even the Dalai Lama has a little increase in his doshas here, there, and everywhere. It happens.

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However, there is a point and there can be a context where these increase to a point all of a sudden starting to affect structure and affect function. So the way it works from an Ayurvedic perspective is this Vata dosha being light and spacious, if she increases too much in the bone tissue, we end up with too much space and too much lightness, not enough solidity, stability, not enough density of tissue.

And so aggravation of vata dosha induces lightness and spaciousness in that tissue. And this can happen in any tissue, but from an osteoporosis or osteopenia perspective, we're looking at a very specific tissue. So aggravation of Vata, inducing lightness and spaciousness is the Ayurvedic description of osteopenia and osteoporosis.

And the further along it goes from a modern perspective, we say osteopenia, osteoporosis. In Ayurveda, we simply see it as one continuum, which is a depletion of the bone tissue. It gets too light. It gets too spacious, which affects its stability, its integrity, and its structure.

And interestingly, since we were talking about the fear piece, when vata increases in the system, a biological outcome can be the osteos, but a mental emotional outcome of increased vata in the system, because in Ayurveda we do not separate the mind and the body. These are one integrated, totally whole system. Like you just can't pull them apart. It's not possible.

An increase of Vata dosha in the heart-mind can lead to fear. We have an increase in fear. So that's also curious, this connection as you're seeing. This particular experience of depletion of a tissue, and then this fear of that experience is just interesting. So that fear, psychologically, right, is we would say when people are afraid, we'd say, oh, there's an increase in vata in the system.

Susi: So interesting. Really, really cool. So then when we're looking at supporting somebody who has either a diagnosis of osteopenia or osteoporosis, because I am going to put it that way because you're talking

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about it just being on a continuum, then how are you then thinking around, here is what we're going to do next?

Do you typically begin digestively? Do you typically begin in other ways to support vata? Like where do, and I know it's going to be different based on different people, but what's sort of a general patterning to give people an idea of how the approach might work to support somebody?

Mona: So we would use a multi-pronged approach because we can, right? So we would do multiple things. However, the most effective thing, and to get to the root of the issue, is to make sure the digestion is strong so that we're able to rebuild tissue. Because we can do all sorts of other things, however, if we don't support the rebuilding of that tissue, we're not actually solving the challenge, right? We're not solving the prime concern, right?

And so we absolutely would be looking at the digestion and how to support that. And that's where it becomes individual. What has happened to digestion? How does it need support? So we would look at that.

And then we would also be looking at how is vata manifesting in this person's system? Is it manifesting through digestion? Is it manifesting in constipation? Is it manifesting in headaches? Is it manifesting in nervous system activation? Is it manifesting, you know, there's a thousand ways that vata can show up.

And so we would be looking at that and then trying to support the person. I typically use the approach of the three pillars. I find that that is such a useful map and it's one people understand.

So the first pillar is nourishment. And in order to nourish you, we need to look at the digestion. And once the digestion is stabilized and hopefully even optimized, then we fill with nourishment that would be specific for the rebuilding of the tissues, especially the bone tissue. And so there are even certain herbs that we would use. There's certain foods that we would use.

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However, if we can't digest, then none of that avenue of treatment or I should say of recommendation is going to be useful. So if you can't digest the herbs, the increase of calcium, your body can't use it so there's no point. So support digestion and then once that's back online, boom, we infuse.

The second thing we need to make sure of, and this is where some of the vata management would come in. Our second pillar is sleep, rest, rejuvenation, and restoration. And so what's happening there? Are we sleeping? Are we sleeping well? Are we getting enough deep sleep? What's the load look like? And how do we support restoration and rejuvenation?

Once the digestion's online, we have the component parts in there. Amazing. However, when is all this rebuilding happening? When we rest. And so how does the rest look? And so then I would look at that.

And then the third pillar, which is usually resource management or energy management, and that's referring to what are we doing day to day? What's happening in the daily activities? What's happening in life? And so then we would look, and that's an area where vata management, so really emphasizing rhythmic living.

What kind of routine, what kind of schedule? And it doesn't mean you have to schedule every single minute of the day the same as every single minute of every other day. But we can really regulate a few key components to calm vata down and really boost our own energy and our own strength. So we can have a regular bedtime, a regular wake time, and some regular nourishment times. So how am I feeding myself?

And we could also be looking at the load. What is happening in someone's life? And are there areas where maybe we can make a change?

Sometimes there isn't. Sometimes sick kids, sick parents, having a job that pays the bills so everyone has a roof over their head. We can't always change everything, but sometimes there are things that we can tweak or adjust in order to support the overall system, right?

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So the nourishment can be really specific to this particular experience of a depletion of the bone tissue. And even in the lifestyle, there are some other things that we can do. I know in Ayurveda, some of you might know, we're very big on oiling the body. And there are oils that are actually made specific for bone health conditions. However, if you can't digest, you can't digest the oil.

And so even some of those lifestyle practices or some of those less food-related kinds of practices that we would use as part of our multi-pronged approach, if the digestion is offline, those are no longer useful.

And so it would kind of look something like that, where we would look at all those three pillars of health, and we would see where we can shore things up, stabilize, optimize.

And then with osteo, what's really interesting is a big part of the process is just doing the thing. And so often I'll see clients, and at first when I see them, I see them once a month or once every six weeks for the first little bit.

But once everything is kind of rolling and all the things are in place, then it's like, just do this for the next six months and then check back in. Just do this for the next six months and check back in. Just do this for the next six months and check back in. Because then it's a matter of simply doing the things that you know are going to maintain your health and wellbeing.

And as we age, vata naturally increases. As we age, the digestion, if we don't work with it, declines. And so these are things that we need to continue, possibly for quite a while, in order to maintain the health of those tissues. But there's totally lots we can do from the Ayurvedic perspective. So lots of options for people to bring practices into their lives to support themselves, which I think feels empowering.

Susi: Yes, and I think the other piece too, given stories that I hear from my clientele who, we aren't specifically trying to improve their bone health, we're just supporting them in where they are. Then when they are going

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back to get scans and they learn that their bone health is better, that's always fun, right? That's always a fun thing to hear about. Whereas with the work you're doing, it's a little bit more specific and direct in terms of how you're using those three pillars.

And what's so lovely about this conversation is there's so much that we can do as we're getting older. And I think a lot of people can be afraid of the aging process. They can be fearful if they've received a diagnosis because the next statement is, well, just don't fall. As we were saying before we started recording, it's like, yeah, because who plans to fall? And so it's kind of an unhelpful statement to make.

And so here's a way to, we recognize the realities of getting older and to meet the energy where it's at. There was an episode we did with Ruth Ann Penny and Laurie Newmyer a while back and it was regarding being older and taking the certification program. And it was Ruth Ann who said, we recognize that kids grow. And at some point the word grow turns into aging. And there's something that then aging doesn't quite have the same positivity to it that growing has.

And there's all the kind of bullet points that come with aging that's like, and then this happens and this happens and this happens and it's all downhill from here and like all the things, right?

And really what I'm hoping people are getting from this, and most of the audience who is listening to this podcast are already of this mindset and I'm hoping this is an additive piece for you, is that we're in a different state. We're in a different environment and we get to meet that environment, that experience that we're having where it's at and really being supportive and kind of juicing the energy for all it's worth, right? And providing the nourishment that we can.

And like you, I hope that this comes across as being inspiring and empowering and something that you can do for yourself, that tissue can change.

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Mona: It always strikes me when people start to have concern about this or somebody comes to me and says, “Hey, I was at the doctor and they did a scan and we got this result and now I’m concerned, I’m worried.” And I always say to them, “Thank goodness you have this amazingly intelligent body that’s helping you help you, right?” And so, okay, you got a scan and now you have a diagnosis. This is simply the body’s way of asking for support.

The key is to, again, be able to just decipher the code and I feel like Ayurveda is one of the best maps for that. So, okay, we have lowered bone density. The body’s simply asking, can you help me with my bone density? You know, it’s not out to get us. Your body will die for you someday. If you wanna talk about unconditional love, it’s the love of the body for the organism that it’s hosting. It does everything for us.

And so, when it asks and just sometimes we don’t know the subtler whispers, okay, so we get a diagnosis. It’s simply the body asking for support. And then if we provide it with what it needs, it will realign, it will readjust itself. We do that all the time.

So, it’s interesting, I can understand that it’s very disconcerting to get a diagnosis. I’ve had my fair share, so like I get it. I don’t necessarily love that moment, or at least I didn’t before. But now when it happens, I’m always like, okay, thank you for telling me what you need. Let me give you what you need, you know? And it allows us to even, if we’re willing to see it this way, enter into an even deeper relationship with ourselves.

Susi: Yeah, I love it. Body is our friend, body is communicating and we get to have that relationship with it.

Mona: Mm-hmm, it’s all it’s asking for and thank goodness for all these amazing modern measuring tools that help us to be more specific and collect the data so that we can get more clear on how to support ourselves. It’s brilliant.

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Susi: Yeah, I love it. So, so good. So, Mona, if people want to get in touch with you and have a consult with you, how is the best way to reach you? What's your website?

Mona: Yeah, my website is monawarner.com and my email is mona@monawarner.com. I'm pretty simple.

Susi: Awesome. So good. That's all going to be in the show notes, so by all means, reach out to Mona. And if this has resonated with you and you want to take our integrative approach to working with osteoporosis, this is a professional training, you can join us over at functionalsynergy.com/bone.

So great to chat with you again, Mona.

Mona: Thank you, Susie. Thanks everyone.

Susi: Brilliant. We will see you again next time. Take care. Bye bye.

Mona: Bye everyone.