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To Your Health

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Jaw condition may be a side effect of bone drug

Bone-strengthening medications taken to prevent and treat osteoporosis are the latest drugs to have surprise side effects. It turns out some patients who take bisphosphonates suffer a jaw condition that can cause painful gum infections and loose teeth.



The condition, called jaw osteonecrosis, or death of the jawbone, has occurred in some patients taking these drugs, says Dr. Kenneth Hargreaves, a San Antonio endodontist. The condition has occurred after root canal treatment, tooth extraction or dental surgery, Hargreaves says.

Not all bisphosphonates cause this problem, he says. The biggest culprits are the ones given intravenously to treat bone complications of cancer. But women who cannot tolerate the oral form are increasingly receiving the drug this way.

What should you do if you need a bisphosphonate? Take care of any dental problems before going on the medication, recommends Dr. James Grober, a rheumatologist with Evanston Northwestern Healthcare. If you already are on bisphosphonates and need dental work, you may want to stop taking the drug for awhile and consult your dentist.