

## JAWS

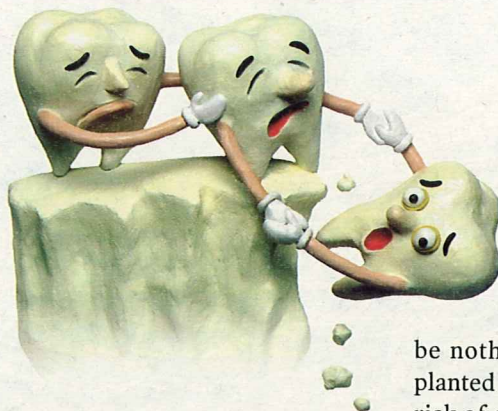
## Bone Drug Alert

People taking Fosamax and similar drugs to enhance bone density may risk a very rare but alarming side effect: "jawbone death."

Medical journals have reported hundreds of cases in which patients taking drugs known as bisphosphonates developed osteonecrosis of the jaw (ONJ). Potentially disfiguring and hard to treat, ONJ is characterized by jaw pain and ulcerations in the mouth.

The problem seems to arise mainly after patients—predominantly cancer patients receiving the drugs intravenously—undergo an invasive dental procedure such as tooth extraction.

But some patients with ONJ have taken pills—Fosamax or, less commonly, Actonel—for osteoporosis, the thinning of the bones that can lead to fractures. In April a Florida woman sued Merck, the maker of Fosamax, claiming the drug destroyed her jaw-



bone. Merck added ONJ to the warning label for Fosamax last year.

Susan Ott, M.D., an osteoporosis expert at the University of Washington, says the drug may be overused among women who overestimate their risk for osteoporosis. But she says women with full-blown osteoporosis should not avoid Fosamax because the risk of jawbone problems is very small.

Patients taking bisphosphonates should alert their dental professionals, says Marc Balson, past president of the American Association of Endodontists.

## IMPLANT RECALL

## Do Nothing

Suppose you have an implanted cardiac defibrillator and the manufacturer recalls the device?

The best thing to do may be nothing, since replacing an implanted defibrillator has a substantial risk of complications, says Andrew Krahn, M.D., of the London Health Sciences Centre in Ontario, Canada.

Krahn surveyed reports on 2,915 Canadians with implants who received recall notices during 2004-2005. Eighteen percent (533) had replacement surgery—of those, 43 had complications and two died. Among those who did not replace the device, only three malfunctions occurred—there were no fatalities or serious complications. The study was published April 26 in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*.

A U.S. study, also reported in the

*Journal*, found that of 43 receiving implants from 2000-2003, 31 died due to malfunction.

## CANCER KILLER

## Spice of Life

Ordinary powdered ginger killed human ovarian cancer cells in a laboratory experiment at the University of Michigan.

The spice killed the cells in different ways, indicating it may also limit cell resistance to standard treatment, says J. Rebecca Liu, M.D., of the university's Comprehensive Cancer Center.

Liu, who reported the findings at the American Association of Cancer Research meeting in April, says the test ginger in animals.

—ROBERTA YARED & KATH

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