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Sarcopenia is the debilitating illness no one has heard of

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BY DIANE LADE - SOUTH FLORIDA SUN-SENTINEL/MCCLATCHY NEWSPAPER

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. - Elayne Goldhair knows about osteoporosis, the age-related disease that causes loss of bone mass. She eats plenty of fruits and vegetables, and has a bone density test every other year.

But like most people, the 86-year-old Palm Beach, Fla., resident has never heard of a similar medical condition that can lead to serious complications: sarcopenia - age-related loss of muscle mass. Sarcopenia, along with osteoporosis and dementias like Alzheimer's disease, are the most common reasons seniors become unable to care for themselves and end up in nursing homes.

Studies suggest sarcopenia may affect 40 percent of people age 80 or older - about 9.1 million Americans - and accounts for \$18.5 billion in health care expenditures annually.

Yet sarcopenia remains virtually unknown among most Americans. No public education campaigns focus on sarcopenia in the way osteoporosis and Alzheimer's have been spotlighted. There are no commonly used screenings for the condition, and no hot new sarcopenia drugs.

But several health organizations are working to raise sarcopenia's profile and highlight that its progress can be slowed through diet and exercise.

"I think the problem is that people just accept muscle loss as part of old age," said Dr. Christy Carter, an assistant professor at the University of Florida's Department of Aging and Geriatrics, who is doing research on sarcopenia in rats. "But it is a huge and growing health concern."

Goldhair spent the past seven weeks at the Joseph L. Morse Geriatric Center in West Palm Beach after fracturing her pelvis.

One of the goals of her physical therapists there was rebuilding her leg muscle strength so she could go back to living on her own in her apartment.

Dr. Bernard A. Roos, a professor, researcher and director of the University of Miami Geriatrics Institute, calls sarcopenia "my little orphan."

"There is no sarcopenia association. We don't have pills for it and we don't pay doctors to treat it," said Roos, who also is the director of the Miami Veterans Affairs Geriatric Research Center and has done numerous studies on sarcopenia.

But Roos thinks that is changing.

"When I started looking at osteoporosis in 1972, people told me there never would be a cure. Now we have 20 drugs that treat it," he said. "Before I retire, we will have sarcopenia treatments."

Scientists still don't understand exactly why sarcopenia occurs, although we all begin losing some muscle as early as our 40s.

People with advanced sarcopenia can't rise on their own from a chair, get in or out of bed, or put their groceries on a shelf. They may have trouble walking, bathing or going to the bathroom without help.

It often is a hidden contributor to other medical conditions: heart failure, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and some types of arthritis.