Adult osteomalacia
A treatable cause of “fear of falling” gait

A 65-year-old man was hospitalized with a gait disorder, obliging him to shuffle laterally1 (video on the Neurology® Web site at www.neurology.org) because of pain and proximal limb weakness. He had a gastrectomy for cancer 7 years previously, with severe vitamin D deficiency; parathormone and alkaline phosphatase were increased, with reduced serum and urine calcium and phosphate. There was reduced bone density (figure). He was mildly hypothyroid and pancytopenic. B12 and folate levels were normal. Investigation for an endocrine neoplasm (CT scan, Octreoscan) was negative. EMG of proximal muscles was typical for chronic myopathy; nerve conduction studies had normal results.

After 80 days’ supplementation with calcium, vitamin D, and levothyroxine, the patient walked properly without assistance (video); pancytopenia and alkaline phosphatase improved.

This unusual but reversible gait disorder may have resulted from bone pain and muscular weakness related to osteomalacia2 and secondary hyperparathyroidism, with a psychogenic overlay.

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