Vienna — More than half of postmenopausal women being treated for osteoporosis in the United States and the rest of the world have vitamin D levels that are inadequate for skeletal health, according to two recent cross-sectional surveys totaling 2,821 such women in 20 countries.

Wherever we look in the world, patients are not getting enough vitamin D to maintain calcium homeostasis. This is a missed opportunity. When we’re giving bone-active drugs to patients with osteoporosis, if we don’t think about vitamin D inadequacy then we miss the opportunity to ensure that our patients have optimal gains in bone mineral density. And these studies show that the problem is very common,” said David Hosking, M.D., at the annual European congress of rheumatology.

The North American survey involved 1,536 community-dwelling postmenopausal women being treated for osteoporosis. Of these, 52% were found to have a serum 25-hydroxyvitamin D (25(OH)D) level below 30 ng/mL, which experts define as the cutoff for vitamin D inadequacy from the standpoint of facilitating calcium absorption in the intestine. Both surveys showed the prevalence of secondary hyperparathyroidism increased.

Of postmenopausal osteoporosis patients, 52% were found to have a serum 25-hydroxyvitamin D level below 30 ng/mL, based on the lab’s reference range. It was observed that vitamin D insufficiency was “searingly hot, hard to educate patients about,” said Anne E. de Papp, M.D., of the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. “I think we may have to ask patients to eat more vitamin D–rich foods, as the list of such foods is limited. ‘I think for us within osteoporosis, it’s much easier to target patients who need vitamin D supplements as part of our treatment because, after all, we’re giving them a preparation to control their bone disease, so it’s practical to deal with vitamin D at that stage,’ he said.

His analysis of the survey data was funded by Merck Sharp & Dohme Ltd. He is a consultant to the company as well as a member of its speakers’ bureau.