

No BONES ABOUT IT

What you need to
know about
osteoporosis



WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT?

Your bones have a thick, strong wall on the outside. Inside this wall, the bone is less dense and has a honeycomb structure. Osteoporosis is a disease that causes your bones to lose mass, thereby weakening the bone on both the inside and outside. Inside, osteoporosis makes your bones more porous; there is more open space within the honeycombs. Outside, osteoporosis causes the thick wall to become thinner and more brittle. This means that your bones will break more easily.

Most people naturally begin to slowly lose bone mass at about age 40. This is because the needed mineral deposits in your bones begin to break down faster than they can be replaced. Osteoporosis accelerates this process.

Osteoporosis affects more than 43 million people in the United States, and causes more than 1.5 million fractures to the backbone, forearms, and hips every year. In postmenopausal women and the elderly, it is the most common cause of fractures. The end result of osteoporosis is pain, loss of height, restricted mobility, or curvature in your backbone. There are significant dangers involved. According to the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, as many as one in five patients dies within six months of a hip fracture due to complications caused by the resulting lack of activity. These complications may include blood clots, stroke, heart attack, and pneumonia.

WHO IS LIKELY TO GET OSTEOPOROSIS?

Women are more likely than men to get osteoporosis because their bones are naturally less dense.

Women who have gone through menopause are the most susceptible to osteoporosis because their estrogen level drops. Estrogen is a hormone that is very important to bone growth. According to the Arthritis Foundation, the risk of osteoporosis also increases if you:

- *Have a family history of osteoporosis*
- *Are of Northern European or Asian descent*
- *Are fair-skinned, thin and have a small build*
- *Ingest too little calcium*
- *Have too much protein and fat in your diet*
- *Have a history of broken bones*
- *Are male with low levels of testosterone*
- *Use certain medications, such as steroids or thyroid hormone, that reduce bone strength*
- *Smoke*

- ***Drink more than two alcoholic beverages a day***
- ***Do not exercise regularly***

HOW DO I KNOW IF I HAVE OSTEOPOROSIS?

Because osteoporosis is painless, you may not realize you have it right away. Some people don't begin to suspect osteoporosis until they suffer a broken bone from a relatively minor accident. In later stages, a curved spine is a tell tale sign. The curvature is caused by the vertebrae in your back becoming weak and eventually collapsing under the weight of your body.

Your medical history and a physical examination can be helpful in diagnosing osteoporosis. X-rays can sometimes reveal the results of osteoporosis. But the only way to detect osteoporosis with certainty is to take a bone density test. This test accurately measures the density of your bones, and can also help your doctor track your

rate of bone loss. The test is simple, like an X-ray ordered by your physician. It typically takes only a few minutes, and is safe, painless, and noninvasive.

How Is OSTEOPOROSIS TREATED?

There are many ways to treat osteoporosis. Typically, a combination of treatments is used. These treatments include:

- ***Increasing calcium intake***
- ***Exercising regularly***
- ***Taking estrogen***
- ***Increasing vitamin D intake***
- ***Making lifestyle changes***

The symptoms of osteoarthritis can be treated with physical therapy, pain relievers, and rest. Hormone therapy (estrogen) can slow the development of osteoporosis and reduce the risk of fracture. Increasing calcium intake can slow the rate of bone loss, and vitamin D can help increase the amount of calcium your body absorbs from your

intestines. Exercise, such as walking or light weightlifting, is especially important because it also helps keep muscles strong and improves coordination and balance, which can help prevent falls and subsequent fractures. Be sure to consult your doctor before starting any exercise program.

CAN OSTEOPOROSIS BE PREVENTED?

It may not be possible to prevent osteoporosis, but its onset can be delayed, or its progress slowed. It is important to start early in adulthood and continue your efforts as long as possible.

The best thing you can do is to exercise regularly, eat a regular daily diet that provides plenty of calcium and vitamin D, and avoid the risk factors mentioned earlier.

WHY IS CALCIUM SO IMPORTANT?

Most people know that calcium is important in building strong bones and teeth. But it also plays a vital role in other bodily functions, such as moving your muscles, blood clotting, and maintaining your heart and nervous system. Typically your body can absorb enough calcium from the food you eat to supply these needs. However, as you get older, your body becomes less efficient at absorbing and using calcium. If your daily intake of calcium is not sufficient, your body will begin to take calcium from your bones, robbing them of their strength and density.

HOW CAN I GET ENOUGH CALCIUM AND VITAMIN D?

The best way to get calcium is in milk and other dairy products. If you are allergic to dairy products, you should eat other foods that contain calcium, such as leafy green vegetables, yogurt, soy flour, and sesame seed.

Although food is the preferred way to get calcium, supplements are also available. Experts recommend 1,500 mg. per day for teens, pregnant or breast-feeding women, and older adults. This amount is especially important if you are an older adult, because your intestines don't absorb calcium as efficiently as those of a younger person. Most calcium supplements are available in 500 mg. tablets and should be taken with food. If you take more than one tablet per day, try to take one tablet at regular intervals throughout the day. You should never take more than 2,000 mg. of calcium per day, including the calcium you receive in both supplements and food.

Vitamin D can be found in liver, fish oil, and milk that is fortified with vitamin D. Also, exposure to sunlight stimulates your body to produce vitamin D. The recommended daily allowance of a vitamin D supplement is 400-800 units.

THE BOTTOM LINE ON OSTEOPOROSIS

Although osteoporosis can be a debilitating disease, there is a lot you can do to delay its onset, minimize its progress, lessen its impact, and improve your lifestyle. Even if you are healthy and show no signs of osteoporosis now, don't overlook its potential. Talk to your doctor about the best way for you to combat the effects of osteoporosis. It's never too early to begin.

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