

Preventing Osteoporosis

Osteoporosis is a disease characterized by low bone mass and deterioration of bone tissue, leading to bone fragility and increased susceptibility to fractures of the hip, spine and wrist. Osteoporosis can strike at any age, and it often occurs without any symptoms. Read more to learn if you are at risk of osteoporosis and to learn prevention techniques.

Osteoporosis Risk Factors

Many people with osteoporosis have several of these risk factors, but others who develop osteoporosis have no identified risk factors. There are some risk factors that you cannot change and others that you can, and it is important to understand the difference.

The following are risk factors you cannot change:

- **Gender:** Your chances of developing osteoporosis are greater if you are a woman. Women have less bone tissue and lose bone more rapidly than men because of the changes involved in menopause.
- **Age:** The older you are, the greater your risk of osteoporosis. Your bones become less dense and weaker as you age.
- **Body size:** Small, thin-boned women are at greater risk.
- **Ethnicity:** Caucasian and Asian women are at highest risk. African-American and Latino women have a lower but significant risk.
- **Family history:** Susceptibility to fracture may be, in part, hereditary. People whose parents have a history of fractures also seem to have reduced bone mass and may be at risk for fractures.

The following are risk factors you can change:

- Sex hormones, abnormal absence of menstrual periods (amenorrhea), low estrogen level (menopause) in women and low testosterone level in men
- Anorexia
- A lifetime diet low in calcium and vitamin D
- Use of certain medications, such as glucocorticoids or some anticonvulsants
- An inactive lifestyle or extended bed rest
- Cigarette smoking
- Excessive use of alcohol.

Symptoms of Osteoporosis

Osteoporosis is often called the "silent disease" because bone loss occurs without symptoms. People may not know that they have osteoporosis until their bones become so weak that a sudden strain, bump or fall causes a hip fracture or a vertebra to collapse. Collapsed vertebrae may initially be felt or seen in the form of severe back pain, loss of height or spinal deformities.

Prevention Tips

To reach optimal peak bone mass and continue building new bone tissue as you get older, there are several factors you should consider:

- **Calcium:** An inadequate supply of calcium over the lifetime is thought to play a significant role in contributing to the development of osteoporosis. Good sources of calcium include low-fat dairy products, dark green, leafy vegetables, tofu and foods fortified with calcium. Depending on how much calcium you get each day from food, you may need to take a calcium supplement.
- **Vitamin D:** Vitamin D plays an important role in calcium absorption and in bone health. While many people are able to obtain enough vitamin D naturally, studies show that vitamin D production decreases in the elderly, in people who are housebound and during the winter.
- **Exercise:** Like muscle, bone is living tissue that responds to exercise by becoming stronger. The best exercise for your bones is weight-bearing exercise that forces you to work against gravity.
- **Smoking:** Smoking is bad for your bones, as well as for your heart and lungs. Women who smoke have lower levels of estrogen compared to non-smokers and frequently go through menopause earlier. Postmenopausal women who smoke may require higher doses of hormone replacement therapy and may have more side effects. Smokers may also absorb less calcium from their diets.
- **Alcohol:** Regular consumption of two to three ounces a day of alcohol may be damaging to the skeleton, even in young women and men. Those who drink heavily are more prone to bone loss and fractures, both because of poor nutrition, as well as increased risk of falling.
- **Medications that cause bone loss:** The long-term use of glucocorticoids (medications prescribed for a wide range of diseases, including arthritis, asthma, Crohn's disease, lupus, diseases of the lungs, kidneys and liver) can lead to a loss of bone density and fractures. It is important to discuss the use of these drugs with your physician and to not stop or alter your medication dose on your own.
- **Prevention medications:** Various medications are available for the prevention, as well as treatment, of osteoporosis.

Preventing Falls

Fall prevention is a special concern for men and women with osteoporosis. Falls can increase the likelihood of fracturing a bone in the hip, wrist, spine or other parts of the skeleton. It is important that individuals with osteoporosis be aware of any physical changes they may be experiencing that affect their balance or gait and that they discuss these changes with their healthcare provider.

Some tips to help eliminate the factors that lead to falls include:

- Use a cane or walker for added stability.
- Wear rubber-soled shoes for traction, and walk on grass when sidewalks are slippery.
- In winter, carry salt or kitty litter to sprinkle on slippery sidewalks.
- Use caution on highly polished floors that become slick and dangerous when wet. Use plastic or carpet runners when possible.
- Keep rooms free of clutter, especially on floors.
- Avoid walking in socks, stockings or slippers.
- Be sure stairwells are well-lit and that stairs have handrails on both sides.
- Install grab bars on bathroom walls near tubs, showers and toilets, and use a rubber bath mat in the shower or tub.
- Consider purchasing a cordless phone so that you do not have to rush to answer the phone when it rings or can call for help if you do fall.

Resources

- National Institutes of Health Osteoporosis and Related Bone Diseases National Resource Center: www.niams.nih.gov/Health_Info/Bone
- National Osteoporosis Foundation: www.nof.org
- U.S. National Library of Medicine: <https://medlineplus.gov/osteoporosis.html>

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