

Get the Facts About Osteoporosis

Throughout our lives, our bones rebuild themselves. We need calcium, vitamin D and other nutrients plus exercise to keep our bones healthy. As we age, though, our bodies break down more bone than they are able to rebuild, which can weaken our bones and make them more prone to fractures.

Osteoporosis, which means “porous bone,” is a disease that occurs when the bones weaken to the point that they become fragile and break easily. These fractures mainly occur in the hips, spine and wrist, but any bone can be affected. Most people aren’t aware that they have osteoporosis until their bones start breaking. Today, about 10 million Americans have been diagnosed with osteoporosis and many more have lost enough bone mass so that they have a condition known as osteopenia, placing them at risk for serious bone loss and fractures.

Are You At Risk?

While anyone can develop osteoporosis, some people are at higher risk than others. Women are more at risk than men. In fact, about 80 percent of all cases of osteoporosis occur in women. Women who are Caucasian or Asian often have lower bone mass and density as part of their ethnic heritage, which puts them at increased risk.

Your personal and family history may place you at greater risk. For instance, if you have a close relative who has osteoporosis or had a broken bone after age 50, osteoporosis may run in your family. You should be aware that if you had a broken bone, you also may be at greater risk.

There are risk factors that you can control including being physically active and getting enough calcium and vitamin D in your diet. If you smoke, you should stop because smoking affects your bone health.

Some medications may cause a loss of bone mass. These can include drugs commonly used to treat arthritis and asthma, called glucocorticoids (such as Prednisone); some anti-seizure medications; cancer drugs and medicines that treat endometriosis. If you have an underactive thyroid, you may be putting your bones at risk if you take too much thyroid hormone.

You should talk to your doctor about your risk factors and ways you can help protect your bones.

Diagnosing Osteoporosis

For some people, a broken bone is the first indication that they have osteoporosis. Other indications can be losing height. A loss of an inch or more in height may be an indication that spinal fractures are occurring.

Doctors use a bone density test to measure bone strength. These tests are painless and safe. The most commonly used bone density test is called dual-energy X-ray absorptiometry or DEXA. DEXA uses X-rays to measure the density of the bone in the spine and the hips. A DEXA scan uses a very low dose of radiation and gives doctors a precise measurement of bone density.

When you have a bone density test, you'll be given a T-score comparing your bone density to that of a young adult. Your T-score is normal if it is above -1. You may have low bone mass (osteopenia) if your T-score is between -1 and -2.5. A score below -2.5 means you have osteoporosis.

The other score, a Z-score, indicates the amount of bone you have compared to others like you (similar gender, age and size). This score will either be above or below the norm. If it is unusually high or low, your doctor may order further testing.

Treatment Options

If your doctor diagnoses you with either low bone mass or osteoporosis, treatments are available that can stop bone loss. A class of drugs called bisphosphonates, such as Fosamax, Actonel and Boniva, help slow the breakdown of bones. These drugs help your body maintain bone mass and reduce the risk of fractures.

Bisphosphonates come in both oral and injectable forms. You should talk to your doctor about your options and decide which would be more appropriate for you. These medications have different dosing schedules. Boniva injections are given every three months while Reclast is given once a year. The pills are taken either weekly or monthly, depending on the drug prescribed by your doctor.

Bisphosphonates may cause stomach upset or heartburn. The medication should be taken on an empty stomach with a large glass of water. You should not lie down or bend over for 30 to 60 minutes after taking the medication to prevent it from washing back into the esophagus.

Some people who take bisphosphonates may develop a rare condition that causes part of their jawbones to deteriorate and die. This mainly occurs when large amounts of the drug are given intravenously to treat cancer of the bone. The risk of this occurring is less than one in 100,000.

Even if you are taking one of the drugs to treat osteoporosis, you should still make sure you are getting enough calcium and vitamin D in your diet and that you exercise regularly.