

OSTEOPOROSIS

Osteoporosis is a progressive and silent disease in which the bones gradually become weaker and weaker, causing changes in posture and making the person very susceptible to fractures. Most people think of osteoporosis as being an old person's disease but recent studies suggest this is not always true. Younger people, especially female athletes, anorexics and chronic dieters, are being diagnosed with this disease.

Many women think they don't have to start worrying about osteoporosis until menopause, but that's not true. The more bone you build early in life by leading a healthy lifestyle, the better you'll be able to withstand bone loss later on. Bone density is highest at around age 30 and thereafter begins to decline. If young athletes (and non-athletes) do not accumulate sufficient bone mass during childhood and early adulthood they are at increased risk for osteoporosis. Other risk factors include a small frame or low body weight, Caucasian or Asian background, early onset of menopause, physical inactivity, low calcium intake, smoking, excessive use of alcohol, and a family history of osteoporosis.

For reasons that aren't always clear, medical conditions linked with a higher risk of osteoporosis include depression, eating disorders, rheumatoid arthritis, stroke, thyroid problems, and testosterone deficiency in men. In addition, long-term use of some medications — especially corticosteroids — can thin the bones.

Recommendations to help prevent osteoporosis

1) Calcium. Men and women should supplement their diet with 1200mg and 1500mg (in divided doses) of calcium per day respectively. Calcium in the form of calcium citrate is the easiest to digest and absorb. Good dietary sources of calcium include reduced-fat dairy products, kale, broccoli, sardines and canned salmon with bones, and calcium-fortified products like orange juice, soy milk, and tofu.

2) Vitamin D and other nutrients. Vitamin D is important in the absorption and utilization of calcium. Food sources include cold water fish such as salmon and sardines. Your skin also produces vitamin D from sun exposure. The recommend dose is 400-800 IUs per day. Other important nutrients include magnesium, boron, potassium, folic acid and vitamins C, E and K.

3) Soy Foods. Soy foods such as tofu, soy beans and soy nuts have a positive effect on bone mass due to their high content of isoflavones which have an estrogen-like effect in the body.

4) Physical activity. Exercise is not only good for your cardiovascular health but is an excellent way to increase bone mass, slow bone loss and reduce the likelihood of falls. Thirty to sixty minutes of weight bearing exercise such as walking or jogging, five to six times a week is highly recommended. Strength training three times per week with weights will also help increase bone mass. Tai chi has been shown to improve balance, reduce the risk of falls and hip fractures in the elderly, and even slow bone loss in postmenopausal women. Yoga is another option for improving balance and flexibility.

5) Falls. Preventing falls and accidents in the home is important especially in the older population. Studies have shown that regular exercise to improve strength and balance is the most effective strategy for preventing falls, but other steps can also help: Wear low-heeled shoes with non-slip soles. Fall-proof your home by keeping floors free of clutter, securing loose rugs, improving lighting, and adding grab bars and non-skid mats where helpful. Be cautious with drugs that can cause dizziness like sedatives and some antidepressants. And get your vision checked regularly and corrected as needed.

6) Avoid smoking. Smoking interferes with the body's ability to use calcium, reduces estrogen levels in the body and increases the risk of hip fractures.

7) Reduce alcohol and caffeine intake. Alcohol decreases the amount of bone building cells in the body. Too much alcohol can also impair balance and coordination leading to a higher risk of falls and fractures. Caffeine causes increased loss of calcium in the urine. Tea has less caffeine than coffee, and research shows that people who regularly drink black or green tea have higher bone mineral densities than those who consume these beverages less frequently.

8) Reduce salt and soda pop intake. Diets high in salt and pop increases the loss of calcium in the urine.