
The Facts About Osteoporosis

What is osteoporosis?

Osteoporosis is a disease that causes bones to become thin, weak and more likely to break, most often from a minor fall. Although you can break a bone in any part of your body, the most common broken bones are the spine, wrist or hip. Osteoporosis is often called a "silent disease." You can't feel or see your bones getting thinner. Many people do not even know that they have thin bones until a bone breaks. A broken bone can interfere with your daily activities, and it can have serious consequences.

How common is osteoporosis?

Osteoporosis is a major public health threat for an estimated 44 million Americans, or for more than half of those 50 or older. In New York State alone, more than 3 million men and women have osteoporosis or low bone mass. In the United States, nearly one of every two Caucasian or Asian women over 50 will experience a broken bone due to osteoporosis. Men and women of other ethnic groups have a slightly lower but still substantial risk of fracture (broken bones).

Is osteoporosis a normal part of aging?

While it is typical to lose some bone mass as you age, it is not normal to have osteoporosis, to experience painful broken bones, or to lose more than 1-1/2 inches of height. Osteoporosis may be prevented and it is easily diagnosed and treated. It is never too early or too late to take care of your bones.

How is osteoporosis diagnosed?

A bone mineral density (BMD) test can diagnose osteoporosis. The results of this test are given using T- Scores. T- scores are used to help identify whether you have normal bone mass, low bone mass (osteopenia), or osteoporosis. When a T-score is -2.5 or below, you are diagnosed with osteoporosis. The lower your T-score, the greater your risk for fracture. Osteoporosis can also be diagnosed if you have had a fracture without trauma when you were older than 50.

What happens when bones break?

A broken bone in your spine is called a vertebral fracture. It is the most common break that occurs as a result of osteoporosis. A spine fracture may affect many parts of your body, besides the broken bone itself. Fractures of the spine can cause loss of height, a curving of the shoulders and back, and a thickening waistline. Sometimes back pain occurs. Depending on the location and severity of the spinal fractures, individuals may experience difficulty breathing and stomach pain or digestive discomfort. In the year following a spine fracture, almost 20% of women will experience another spine fracture. Broken bones in the wrist, arm, leg, pelvis or ribs can cause substantial pain and temporary disability. Surgery, casting or splinting may be required.

The worst consequences of osteoporosis can happen after a hip fracture. Hip fractures most often occur in adults older than 70. Almost all people who have hip fractures require surgery to repair the broken bone. A broken hip may lead to a loss of independence. Following surgery, it is common for individuals to need help from family, friends or health care professionals with daily activities such as bathing, dressing and shopping. Complications from surgery can be serious. In fact, after surgery some people require skilled nursing care at a long-term care facility, and sadly, some people even die.

What can I do to prevent osteoporosis and broken bones?

- **Eat a variety of healthy (nutrient-rich) foods every day.** Eat several servings of fruits and vegetables each day. The average person should eat 4 1/2 cups of fruits and vegetables every day.
- **Get the calcium you need.** Consume 1000 to 1200 milligrams (mg) of calcium each day. It is best to get calcium from the foods you eat. Foods rich in calcium such as low-fat dairy foods (milk, yogurt, cheese), dark green, leafy vegetables (bok choy, broccoli, collard greens, kale, and turnip greens), canned fish (sardines, salmon) eaten with bones, or calcium-fortified (with calcium added) foods. Try to eat a calcium-rich food at each meal. Add calcium supplements (pills) only when you cannot get the calcium you need from food alone.
- **Get the recommended amount of vitamin D.** There are only a few good natural sources of vitamin D including fatty fish such as catfish, eel, mackerel, salmon, sardines, and tuna. Small amounts of vitamin D are added to all milk and some types of soy milk, rice milk, almond milk, yogurt, cheese, juice, and nutrition bars. Check with your health care provider to find out how much vitamin D is recommended for you. It is likely that you will need a vitamin D supplement to get enough vitamin D.
- **Be physically active.** Your bones get stronger and denser when you make them work. Walking, climbing stairs, and dancing are impact (or weight-bearing) exercises that strengthen your bones by moving your body against gravity when you are upright. Resistance exercises, such as lifting weights or using exercise bands, strengthen your bones, and your muscles, too! Tai Chi is an example of physical activity that improves posture and balance to help decrease your risk for falls and fractures. Exercise can be easy; try 10 minutes at a time, adding up the minutes to reach your goal.
- **Don't smoke.** If you do, stop! Call 1-866-NY-QUITS for information about how to quit.
- **Limit alcohol.** Before drinking alcohol, it is important to speak to your health care provider about possible interactions with your medication or your medical condition. Too much alcohol can be bad for your bones and your overall health.
- **Take action to prevent falls.** Most broken bones occur as a result of a fall that could have been prevented. Some actions to prevent falls at home include using nightlights, removing or securing scatter rugs, and getting rid of clutter.
- **Get a Bone Mineral Density Test when indicated.** Speak to your health care provider to find out when you should get a BMD.