

Empower Yourself – Get the Facts

The Basics of Osteoporosis

Osteoporosis is a medical condition characterized by diminished bone strength and increased risk of fracture. Most people think of their bones as being solid like a rock. Actually, bone is a living tissue, just like other parts of the body—your heart, brain, or skin for example. Bone just happens to be a harder type of tissue. Bone is always changing. Your body keeps your bones strong and healthy by replacing old bone with new bone. After menopause the body removes more bone than it replaces which in many women may lead to osteoporosis. Osteoporotic bones are weaker and are more likely to break. Postmenopausal osteoporosis can be prevented, and with proper therapy it can be treated.

Who is affected?

An estimated 8 million women in the U.S. have osteoporosis. And 40% of women age 50 or older will experience an osteoporosis-related fracture in their lifetime. Osteoporosis also affects men, but to a lesser extent. For those at risk for or who have osteoporosis, prevention and treatment are the best defenses.

Diagnosis

Because bone loss is gradual and without warning signs, women often do not seek medical treatment until they experience a bone fracture. That's why osteoporosis is often called a "silent disease." To prevent the complications caused by osteoporosis, postmenopausal women should undergo a bone density test to determine the condition of their bones. If you are over age 50 and have other risks for osteoporosis such as the ones listed below a bone density test could be your first step to understanding your risk for fracture.

Risk Factors

Answering the following questions may help you to determine if you are at risk for osteoporosis-related fractures.

- Are you postmenopausal?
- Have you had a bone fracture after age 50?
- Did your mother suffer a fracture after age 50?
- Do you weigh less than 125 pounds?
- Are you taking oral medicines such as cortisone or prednisone?
- Do you currently smoke?
- Do you need your arms to stand up from a chair?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, you may be at risk for osteoporosis-related fractures. Talk to your doctor about your risk for osteoporosis.

Although it sounds somewhat intimidating, a bone density test is one of the safest, most accurate ways to measure bone density and provide information about your bone health. Since you can't see or feel bone loss, this test is a way to tell if you have or are at risk for osteoporosis. Knowing your bone mineral density test result (which is called a T-score), your doctor can tell if you have lost bone and if you are at increased risk for fracture.

Understanding your risk for osteoporosis is the first step to preventing fractures. With this knowledge you can develop a strategy with your doctor that may include a diet rich in calcium, dietary supplements, exercise, and in some cases, prescription medicines. Your bones will thank you for taking this small but important first step.