

Health Article

Osteoporosis: Know your risk for this “silent disease”

Osteoporosis is a ‘silent thief’ that can slowly rob your bone strength. The good news? You can lower your risk and manage it with the right approach, an expert says.

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By Paula Kehoe

We don’t always give our bones much thought. But counting bone health as part of a healthy and active lifestyle can help prevent osteoporosis. That’s important because one in three women and one in five men will break a bone from this condition.

What is osteoporosis?

“Osteoporosis is often referred to as the silent disease,” says Bonny O’Hare, a physiotherapist and owner of [Pro Motion Physiotherapy](#). It means ‘porous bone’ where the bones become thin and lose their strength and quality.

“Even if your bones are becoming weaker, you won’t feel symptoms,” O’Hare says. “Many people with osteoporosis don’t know they have it until they break a bone.”

Bones that osteoporosis commonly affects are the hips, wrists, spine (vertebra) and arms. More often than not, a bone fracture is a warning sign there may be underlying osteoporosis. It’s especially important to see your doctor about any fractures that occur over the age of 50.

Building strong bones early to prevent osteoporosis

O’Hare explains that experts also call osteoporosis a “pediatric disease with geriatric consequences.” That’s because building strong bones when you’re younger can help you avoid fractures from osteoporosis later.

“Peak bone mass is the maximum bone mass we attain,” O’Hare says. Girls reach about 90% of peak bone mass by age 18 and boys by about age 19 or 20.

Having 10% more peak bone mass can lower your risk of a fracture from osteoporosis by half, she says.

“That’s why it’s very important for children to be active, move their bones, get enough Vitamin D and eat a healthy diet,” she says.

What are the risk factors for osteoporosis?

Although your bones may be out of sight, they don’t need to be out of mind. Knowing the risk factors for osteoporosis helps you know when to speak with your doctor about your bone strength.

Some risk factors to watch for include:

- Loss of height (6 cm or more overall from the time you were a young adult)
- If a parent has had a hip fracture
- If you have had a fracture from a simple fall or bump after age 40
- Smoking
- Excessive alcohol
- Certain medications
- Certain diseases or conditions

Wondering if you have osteoporosis? O’Hare recommends taking a risk assessment, like [one](#) from Osteoporosis Canada.

Why does osteoporosis affect more women than men?

Women tend to have smaller and thinner bones than men. Also, the hormone estrogen, protects bones. As

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estrogen sharply decreases with menopause, it can cause bone loss.

"Women can lose up to 20% of their bone mass in the first five to seven years of menopause," says O'Hare. Menopause is the time to think about bone health if you haven't already, she says.

How is osteoporosis different than osteoarthritis?

Osteoporosis and osteoarthritis are different conditions. But these terms are often confusing because they have similar names.

O'Hare says osteoarthritis is a disease of the joints. When you have it, the cartilage within a joint and the bone underneath degenerate. "If you suffer from both arthritis and osteoporosis, you should receive an exercise program that can manage both diseases," O'Hare says.

How to prevent osteoporosis

There's no cure for osteoporosis at this point. However, preventing and managing it is possible – even if you're at higher risk, O'Hare says. She recommends these 10 ways to keep your bones strong and healthy if you're at risk for osteoporosis or if you have it:

1. Talk to your doctor about a bone mineral density test. This can establish your risk for fractures and calculate if and how much bone loss you have. Have a conversation about recommendations for your bone health.
2. Have your height measured every year by a health-care provider.
3. Talk with your doctor about how much calcium and vitamin D you should take. Be sure to follow their recommendations.
4. Get involved in a bone healthy exercise program. Exercise is essential to improving your bone health and decreasing your risk of falls and fractures.
5. Add exercise to your daily routine. Some of these include weight bearing, resistance training, spinal strengthening, core strengthening, stretching and balance.
6. Stay clear of exercises that aren't good for your bone health. Avoid sit-ups, crunches or bending over to touch your toes. These movements can flex (or round) your spine.
7. Be informed before trying yoga and pilates. About 60% of yoga positions are contra-indicated for someone who has osteoporosis or osteopenia. These are good exercises but you'll need to modify some positions or avoid them altogether. Make sure your instructor is familiar with osteoporosis if you're attending a class.
8. Apply principles of your exercises to how you do things during the day. Be aware of whether or not you are rounding your spine. Think about things such as lifting, brushing your teeth, getting dressed and sitting for long periods.
9. Your health-care provider can customize exercises for you. Make sure it is someone who is familiar with osteoporosis such as an [Osteo-Circuit Physiotherapist](#). They will take into account your medical status, fracture risk, goals and interests. The focus should be on proper technique and then progression for you to get the maximum benefit.
10. If you have had a vertebral fracture, [see a physiotherapist](#) with expertise in osteoporosis. They'll design an exercise program for you that consists of the right exercises and intensity. Treatments may be available virtually if that's your preference or that type of physiotherapist isn't in your area.

"You can easily manage osteoporosis," O'Hare says. Staying proactive about bone health will help you stay healthy and do the things you enjoy."

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