

What is osteoporosis?



Osteoporosis is a disease that thins and weakens bones so that they become fragile and more likely to break. Symptoms include loss of height, a stooped-over appearance and severe back pain (due to spinal or vertebral fractures).

Osteoporosis is sometimes called a “silent disease” because it progresses gradually, often with few or no symptoms. The first sign of osteoporosis is typically a bone fracture.

Osteoporosis is responsible for 1.5 million broken bones each year in the U.S., including fractures of the hip, spine and wrist. These fractures can be painful and serious. A broken hip almost always requires hospitalization and major surgery. It can impair a person’s ability to walk unassisted and may cause lengthy or permanent disability or even death. Osteoporosis can also be emotionally damaging as deformities, loss of height and fear of fractures can lead to self-consciousness, low self-esteem and depression.

Note: Osteoporosis should not be confused with osteoarthritis, a disease of the joints with different causes and treatments.

Who gets osteoporosis?

More than 28 million Americans either have or are at risk of developing osteoporosis. It occurs about four times as often in women than in men. In fact, one in two women over age 50 will experience an osteoporosis-related fracture in her lifetime, while only one in eight men will experience a similar fracture.

A woman’s risk of hip fracture is equal to her combined risk of breast, uterine and ovarian cancer. (National Osteoporosis Foundation)

Osteoporosis occurs most frequently in women who have gone through menopause, because decreasing levels of estrogen cause bones to deteriorate faster. Women also tend to have less bone mass as young adults than men.

What causes osteoporosis?

Throughout our lifetime our bodies are constantly breaking down old bone and rebuilding new bone. Until our mid 30s we actually gain more bone than we lose. That’s when our bone mass and strength peaks. As we age, more bone tissue is lost than is replaced. Menopause triggers an even greater bone loss. During this time, a woman’s body produces much smaller amounts of estrogen — a hormone that helps keep bones strong. When estrogen levels drop, bone loss becomes greater. As bones become thinner and weaker, they are more likely to break.

Too little calcium in your diet is also thought to contribute to osteoporosis. Calcium is needed to grow and maintain strong bones.

What are the symptoms?

Because osteoporosis is gradual and can be fairly painless until later stages, it can be hard to detect. Answering these questions and talking with your doctor may help determine if you have symptoms.

Are you shorter than you used to be? Losing height is not a natural part of aging. In many cases, it’s a sign of osteoporosis.

Is your back in constant pain? Some people with osteoporosis suffer from a slight or severe backache in their lower spinal area. This is because back bones are a common fracture site, as small sections of the spine collapse and cause pain.

Are your shoulders more rounded? Spinal fractures not only result in height loss, but may lead to rounding in the upper back and shoulders. Since this occurs over years, you may not notice it.

Have you recently broken a bone? Bone fractures are a common result of osteoporosis, especially if the break occurs from a minor bump or fall.

Am I at risk?

Having completed menopause is a key risk factor for osteoporosis. But there are several other factors related to the disease:

- Early menopause (before age 45)
- Caucasian or Asian descent
- Thin, small body frame
- Family history of osteoporosis or fractures
- Use of certain medications, such as steroids (Prednisone) and excessive thyroid hormone
- Smoking
- Excessive use of alcohol
- Inactive lifestyle
- A diet low in calcium and/or Vitamin D (either now or as a child)

Can osteoporosis be prevented?

For most people osteoporosis can be prevented. That's important because while osteoporosis can be treated, building strong bones, especially before age 30, is your best defense.

Steps to Prevent Osteoporosis

- A balanced diet rich in calcium (dairy products) and vitamin D (milk, fruits and vegetables); diet may include supplements if necessary
- Weight-bearing and muscle-strengthening exercise such as walking, dancing, jogging, stairclimbing, racquet sports, weight training and low-impact aerobics
- A healthy lifestyle with no smoking or excessive alcohol use
- Bone density testing and medications when advised by a doctor

During midlife, you need to be aware of the importance of maintaining healthy bones, especially at menopause, when decreasing estrogen levels speed bone loss and put you at greater risk for osteoporosis. Your doctor will be able to suggest tests, such as a bone mineral density (BMD) test, and treatment programs (which may include prescription drugs) to reduce the effects of osteoporosis.

It's never too early or too late to start preventing osteoporosis, so talk with your doctor to begin a program that's right for you.

Building strong bones, especially before age 30, is your best defense against osteoporosis.

Other Resources

National Institutes of Health Osteoporosis and Related Diseases — National Resource Center

800-624-BONE
www.osteoporosis.gov

National Osteoporosis Foundation

202-223-2226
www.nof.org

American Society for Bone and Mineral Research

202-367-1161
www.asbmr.org

This material provides general information to help you better understand osteoporosis. It's important to keep in contact with your doctor and have regular checkups. This information should not replace anything your doctor has told you about osteoporosis. Instead, it should help you feel more comfortable talking with your doctor and help you make the best possible decisions about your health care.



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WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT

Osteoporosis



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