

# Osteoporosis

Osteoporosis is a disease of the bones that causes bones to become weak and break easily. Osteoporosis affects mostly older women, but prevention starts when you are younger. No matter your age, you can take steps to build bone mass and prevent bone loss. Broken bones from osteoporosis cause serious health problems and disability in older women.

## Q: Who gets osteoporosis?

**A:** Of the estimated 10 million Americans with osteoporosis, more than 8 million (or 80%) are women.

Osteoporosis is most common in older women. In the United States, osteoporosis affects one in four women 65 or older.

## Q: What are the symptoms of osteoporosis?

**A:** Osteoporosis is called a “silent” disease. You may not have any symptoms of osteoporosis until you break (fracture) a bone. Fractures are most common in the hip, wrist, and spine (vertebrae). Vertebrae support your body, helping you to stand and sit up.

Fractures in the vertebrae can cause the spine to collapse and bend forward. If this happens, you may get any or all of these symptoms:

- Sloping shoulders
- Curve in the back
- Height loss
- Back pain
- Hunched posture

## Q: What causes osteoporosis?

**A:** Osteoporosis is caused by bone loss. Most often, the reason for bone loss is very low levels of the hormone estrogen. Estrogen plays an important role in building and maintaining your bones.

The most common cause of low estrogen levels is menopause. After menopause, your ovaries make very little estrogen. Some women lose up to 25% of bone mass in the first 10 years after menopause.

Also, your risk for developing osteoporosis is higher if you did not develop strong bones when you were young. Girls develop 90% of their bone mass by age 18. If an eating disorder, poor eating, lack of physical activity, or another health problem prevents you from building bone mass early in life, you will have less bone mass to draw on later in life.

## Q: How is osteoporosis diagnosed?

**A:** Your doctor will do a bone density test to see how strong or weak your bones are. A common test is a central dual-energy x-ray absorptiometry (DXA). A DXA is a special type of x-ray of your bones. This test uses a very low amount of radiation.

Your doctor may also use other screening tools to predict your risk of having low bone density or breaking a bone.

## Q: Do I need to be tested for osteoporosis?

**A:** Your doctor may suggest a bone density test for osteoporosis if:

- You are 65 or older
- You are younger than 65 but have risk factors for osteoporosis. Bone density testing is recommended for older women whose risk of breaking a bone is the same as or greater than that of a 65-year-old white woman with no risk factors other than age. Ask your doctor or nurse whether you need a bone density test before age 65.

**Q: How is osteoporosis treated?**

**A:** If you have osteoporosis, your doctor may prescribe medicine to prevent more bone loss or build new bone mass. Your doctor may also suggest getting more calcium, vitamin D, and physical activity.

These steps may help prevent fractures, especially in the hip and spine, that can cause serious pain and disability.

**Q: How can I prevent osteoporosis?**

**A:** You can take steps to slow the natural bone loss with aging and to prevent your bones from becoming weak and brittle.

- Get enough calcium and vitamin D each day.
- Get active. Choose weight-bearing physical activities like running or dancing to build and strengthen your bones.

- Don't smoke.
- If you drink alcohol, drink in moderation (for women, this is one drink a day at most). Too much alcohol can harm your bones.
- Talk to your doctor about whether you need medicine to prevent bone loss.

**Q: Should I take a calcium supplement?**

**A:** It's best to get the calcium your body needs from food. But if you don't get enough calcium from the foods you eat, you may want to consider taking a calcium supplement.

Talk with your doctor or nurse before taking calcium supplements to see which kind is best for you and how much you need to take.

## For more information...

about osteoporosis, call the OWH Helpline at 800-994-9662 or contact the following organizations:

**Food and Drug Administration (FDA), HHS**  
888-463-6332 • [www.fda.gov](http://www.fda.gov)

**National Institute on Aging (NIA), NIH, HHS**  
301-496-1752 • [www.nia.nih.gov](http://www.nia.nih.gov)

**NIH Osteoporosis and Related Bone Diseases  
National Resource Center, NIAMS, NIH, HHS**  
800-624-BONE • [www.niams.nih.gov/  
health\\_info/bone](http://www.niams.nih.gov/health_info/bone)

**American Bone Health**  
888-266-3015 (Bone Health Hotline)  
[www.americanbonehealth.org](http://www.americanbonehealth.org)

**National Osteoporosis Foundation**  
800-231-4222 • [www.nof.org](http://www.nof.org)

**The Office on Women's Health is grateful for the additional reviews by:**

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