

Osteoporosis and Women - The Basics

What is osteoporosis?

The name itself means ‘porous bone’. Bone is made up of a spider-web of tissue that, though there are tiny pores for absorption of minerals, are tightly woven together for strength. When osteoporosis occurs, bone mass is reduced and larger pores are left leaving the bone vulnerable to breaks and fractures. It is like building a wall and then removing several essential bricks. This leaves the wall weakened and easier to knock down.

According to the National Osteoporosis Foundation, this condition is a major problem affecting about 10 million people in the United States. 34 million people are suspected of having poor bone density, which increases their risk. With 8 million of those currently diagnosed and affected being women, it is also primarily a female problem. While osteoporosis can affect any bone, the hip, wrist and spine are most susceptible to fracture or break. These areas are most affected by a fall. They are also some of the hardest working bones in the body.

What are the basic risk factors?

Unfortunately, all women are at risk of developing osteoporosis as they age and during menopause. The reason for this is that estrogen levels decline during menopause, which slows down the production of bone tissue. As women age, their bones cannot keep up with the amount of bone loss. Women naturally have less bone mass than men, which makes women more susceptible to osteoporosis.

Other basic risk factors include: smoking, drinking and not exercising, certain medications and treatments such as anti-depressants and chemotherapy, family history, diet and certain medical conditions such as rheumatoid arthritis.

Can osteoporosis be prevented?

Absolutely, woman can make simple changes to their lifestyle that can improve their odds of beating osteoporosis. By 18, girls have reached nearly 90% of their adult bone mass levels. So, for mothers, it is important to make sure young daughters are getting the calcium and exercise they need for optimal bone growth in those important years.

As an adult, women can continue to protect their bone mass by eating a balanced and healthy diet that includes calcium, either through food or supplements. Strength training with weights or resistance is essential to building strong bones as well. Exercising also improves balance and prevents falls that can lead to possible broken bones. Because a woman is naturally at a disadvantage, just taking care of her body improves her chances of preventing osteoporosis. This includes quitting or not starting smoking and moderating alcoholic intake. If there is a family history, it is vital that a woman discusses this with her doctor so he can monitor her bone density and prescribes appropriate treatments if needed.

How is it diagnosed and how is it treated?

A bone mineral density test can be performed to detect bone loss. A special machine called a dual energy x-ray absorptiometry is used to scan the hips, wrists and back and can detect porous bones that are at risk of fracture. While this is the best method, ultrasound and a CT scan can also

accurately detect osteoporosis. Dr. Yessenow offers BMD (Bone Mass Density) testing in his office.

Once diagnosed, there are several medications available for treatment. Bisphosphonates are antiresorptive medications and, while there isn't cure, they can halt or prevent bone loss. There are many on the market today. Hormone therapy using estrogen as well as parathyroid hormone is also options for medications to stop and even prompt bone growth.

The important fact for women to remember is that they must be proactive about their health and take steps early in life to reduce their risk of osteoporosis.