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perfect fit

Make no bones about osteoporosis

OSTEOPOROSIS (literally meaning 'porous bone') is a disease that thins and weakens bones to the point where they break easily, especially bones in the hip, spine and wrist. A fall or lifting action, or even a cough, that wouldn't injure a person with healthy bones, can result in fractures in people with osteoporosis. For an ageing population, the risk of bone fractures is a serious on-going issue. It is estimated that one out of every two women over the age of 50, and one in every five men, will sustain an osteoporosis-related fracture in his/her lifetime. Men run less of a risk, because they do not have the same kinds of hormone losses as women. Still, after age 55 or 60, men lose about one percent of their bone mass every year.

In adolescence, bones stop growing in size but continue to become more dense, reaching peak mass around age 30. After 35, bone is lost faster than it is replaced — usually by 0.3-0.5 per cent per year. If bone loss is greatly accelerated, osteoporosis results. Bones remain the same size, but become more porous.

Are you at risk?
As osteoporosis is difficult to detect in its early stages, it's important to determine your risk well before you've lost much bone mass. Check the following, and if you are concerned that your risk is above average, ask your doctor for a bone density test.

- Being female
- Having a small, thin frame
- Cigarette smoking
- Excessive alcohol intake
- Advanced age
- A family history of osteoporosis
- Early menopause (before age 40)
- Abnormal absence of menstrual periods
- Eating disorders such as anorexia
- A low-calcium diet
- Low testosterone in men
- A sedentary lifestyle
- Malabsorption problems
- Use of steroid-based medications, anticonvulsant, or thyroid hormone for a long period of time.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has proposed a system by which it set the average bone density for women in their early 30's as the healthy 'norm'. This is when bone mass is typically at its peak.

Symptoms

In the early stages, there are often no symptoms at all. This is why it is called the 'silent disease'. The problem may not be detected till a bone breaks.

As the condition worsens, small fractures may occur in the spine. Standing up too quickly or raising a window can cause a vertebra in the spine to collapse. So that four to five vertebrae may fit in a space previously occupied by only three, leading to height loss of one to eight inches or more.

Symptoms of advanced osteoporosis

- Persistent back pain
- Sudden muscle spasms in the back
- Height loss
- Rib pain



Bone bane: Aerobic exercises can help make your bones stronger

- Curving spine
- Broken bones
- Abdominal pain
- Breathing problems
- Tooth loss

A comprehensive osteoporosis treatment programme includes a focus on proper nutrition, exercise and safety issues in order to prevent falls that may result in fractures.

Prevention: self-care

Osteoporosis is preventable, even when it runs in families. The best way to do this is to begin early in childhood. A calcium-rich diet can set the stage for a healthy future.

Get enough calcium

Ca not only helps to build and keep strong bones, but is vital for the functioning of nerves and muscle. The recommended daily intake of Ca is 800 mg. Most Indian women consume far less than this.

- Teens to mid-twenties — 1,200 mg day
- Before menopause — 800 mg per day
- Pregnant and breast-feeding women 1,200 per day
- After menopause — 1,000 mg for women on ERT

Food sources

- Milk and milk products such as cheese, yogurt, cottage cheese, because they contain vitamin D and lactose, two substances that aid Ca absorption.
 - Canned fish with edible bones, such as salmon and sardines
 - Dark green leafy vegetables such as kale and broccoli
 - Calcium-fortified foods such as orange juice and breads made with Ca fortified flour
- Even if your diet is loaded with Ca, many factors can reduce the amount available to your body. These include:
- A high-protein diet
 - Alcohol (more than two drinks a day)
 - Coffee (more than four cups a day)
 - Fasting or crash dieting
 - Oxalates (in spinach, chard, beet greens, rhubarb)
 - Phytates (in the bran of whole grains)

There's no reason to avoid eating spinach or whole grains because of oxalates and phytates, if you have other calcium-rich sources in your diet, you should be fine.

Supplements

If you don't get enough Ca from your food, you might think of getting Ca supplements. Ca is best absorbed if taken in 250-500 mg doses throughout the day. To lessen side effects, it's best to time supplements with meals.

You can't absorb Ca without enough vitamin D. The current recommendation for vitamin D is 400 I.U. sources of vitamin D include butter, cream, fish oils, liver and egg yolk.

Always check with your doctor before taking supplements.

Detection

A medical examination for osteoporosis includes a physical exam, in which height and weight are measured and a check is made for pain or bone deformities. Tests for thyroid and vitamin D may be included as well.