

Are you at risk for osteoporosis?

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DO you think doctors measure patients' height and weight just to point out that they are too short for their weight?

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Trust me, doctors are not that sinister.

A loss of height is a serious matter. It can mean the patient has significant bone loss. According to the National Institute of Health, more than 10 million Americans suffer from osteoporosis and 34 million more Americans have low-bone mass placing them at risk for developing the disease.

Osteoporosis is responsible for more than 1.5 million bone fractures each year.

Most people think that grandma fell and broke her hip. The probability or actuality is that grandma broke her hip and then fell. From that point forward, quality of life becomes an issue.

Certain risk factors are beyond our control. Women are at greater risk than men. Caucasian and Asian women are at greater risk than African-American or Hispanic women. A small, thin frame, age and family history of osteoporosis also increase our risks.

Bone loss prevention is aided by proper nutrition including sufficient amounts of calcium and vitamin D. Weight-bearing exercise is best and includes walking, jogging, dancing and weight training. Cigarettes and alcohol increase the risk of bone loss. Certain medications might be necessary, but could weaken bones.

Low testosterone or estrogen levels also can increase the risk of osteoporosis.

Symptoms are not always noticeable. Osteoporosis is known as a silent disease. However, we all recognize kyphosis, the exaggerated hump some people develop. Loss of height can be subtle but is a good indication. If you wonder about height loss but are not sure how to track it, a good resource can be your driver's license. Most of us don't update the information often, so it can serve as a reference point.

Severe back pain also might be a symptom. It is important to mention your concerns to your doctor. He or she will order a painless test to determine the density of your bones.

Should you be diagnosed with osteopenia or osteoporosis, your doctor might order medication to help rebuild bone. It is important to follow the instructions including the recommended daily amounts of calcium and vitamin D.

To help slow the progression of osteoporosis, patients should develop new healthy habits. Small changes in how you eat and increases in exercise along with

medication will help. Also make sure your home is safe. Fall prevention includes installing sturdy handrails and removing clutter and throw rugs.

And remember, should you fall, a portable phone can be a life-saver.

- Paul Detty, MD, is a physician at Fairfield Medical Center.

<http://www.lancastereagle.com/article/20090603/NEWS01/906030317>