

On Call: Are you at risk for osteoporosis?

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Osteoporosis can strike at any age, but it is most common in older women. In fact, 80 percent of Americans with osteoporosis are women. One in every two women over age 50 will break a bone in her lifetime due to osteoporosis. Men fare somewhat better, with one in every four men over age 50 suffering an osteoporosis-related fracture.

The bottom line: Both men and women should take steps to maintain and improve bone health. And there's no better time than May —National Osteoporosis Awareness and Prevention Month — to deliver this message.

The risk factors

A number of factors can increase your risk of bone loss and osteoporosis.

In some cases, risk factors are beyond your control. In other cases, you can make some healthy choices that will help reduce your risk.

Risk factors you cannot change:

- Gender. Women get osteoporosis more often than men.
- Age. The older you are, the greater your risk of osteoporosis.
- Body size. Small, thin women are at greater risk.

- Ethnicity. White and Asian women are at highest risk. Black and Hispanic women have a lower risk.
- Family history. Osteoporosis tends to run in families. If a family member has osteoporosis or breaks a bone, there is a greater chance that you will too.

Risk factors you can change:

- Calcium and vitamin D intake. A diet low in calcium and vitamin D makes you more prone to bone loss.
- Activity level. Lack of exercise can cause weak bones.
- Smoking. Cigarettes are bad for your bones, heart and lungs.
- Drinking alcohol. Too much alcohol can cause bone loss and broken bones.
- Anorexia nervosa. This eating disorder can lead to osteoporosis.
- Sex hormones. Low estrogen levels due to missed menstrual periods or to menopause can cause osteoporosis in women. Low testosterone levels can bring on osteoporosis in men.
- Medication use. Some medicines increase the risk of osteoporosis.

Keeping your bones healthy

Following are some things you can do to help keep your bones strong and to slow down bone loss:

- Eat a diet rich in calcium and vitamin D.
- Exercise.
- Don't smoke.
- Don't drink in excess.
- Talk to your doctor about bone health.
- Have a bone density test and take medication if appropriate.

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