

Osteoporosis Information for WellCare Members

What is Osteoporosis?

Osteoporosis is a disease that affects your bones. It means you have bones that are thin and brittle and easy to break. It can lead to broken bones (fractures) in the hip, spine, and wrist. These fractures can be disabling and may make it hard for you to live on your own. This condition affects millions of older adults. It usually strikes after age 60. It's most common in women, but men can get it too.

What Causes Osteoporosis?

It is caused by a lack of bone strength or bone density. As you age, your bones get thinner naturally. But some things can make you more likely to have the bone thinning that comes with the condition. These things are called risk factors. Some risk factors you can change. Others you can't change.

Risk factors you **can't** change include:

- Your age — your risk goes up as you get older
- Being a woman who has gone through menopause because after menopause, the body makes less estrogen, which protects the body from bone loss
- Your family background — osteoporosis tends to run in families
- Having a slender body frame
- Your race — people of European and Asian background are most likely to get osteoporosis

Risk factors you **can** change include:

- Smoking
- Not getting enough weight-bearing exercise
- Drinking too much alcohol
- Not getting enough calcium and vitamin D in the things you eat or from supplements

What are the Symptoms?

Osteoporosis can be very far along before you notice it. Sometimes the first sign is a broken bone in your hip, spine or wrist after a bump or fall. As the disease gets worse, you may have other signs, such as pain in your back. You might notice that you are not as tall as you used to be and that you have a curved backbone.

How is it Diagnosed?

Your doctor will ask about your symptoms. He or she will do an exam. You may also have a test that measures your bone thickness. This is called a bone density test. The test may find that your bone thickness is less than normal but is not osteoporosis. This could mean you have osteopenia. This is a less severe type of bone thinning. It's important to find and treat osteoporosis early to prevent bone fractures. Routine bone density testing is recommended for women age 65 and older. It's best to start getting the test at age 60 if you have a higher risk for fractures.

How is it Treated?

Treatment includes medicine to reduce bone loss and to build bone thickness. It can also give you relief from pain caused by broken bones or other changes to your bones.

It's important to take both calcium and vitamin D supplements. You need both of these to build strong, healthy bones. It's also important to take any medicine you take for the disease.

You can slow the condition with new, healthy habits. If you smoke, quit. Get plenty of exercise. Walking, jogging, dancing, and lifting weights can make your bones stronger. Eat a healthy mix of foods that include calcium and vitamin D, such as:

- Dark green vegetables
- Yogurt
- Milk
- Eggs
- Fatty fish
- Fortified cereal

Making even small lifestyle changes can help prevent a broken bone.

Protect yourself from falling when you have osteoporosis. Reduce your risk of breaking a bone by making your home safer. Make sure there's enough light in your home. Remove throw rugs and clutter that you may trip over. Put sturdy handrails on stairs.

References

Healthwise, Incorporated. Osteoporosis. Author: Shannon Erstad, MBA/MPH. Medical Review: Anne C. Poinier, MD (Internal Medicine), Kirtly Jones, MD (Obstetrics and Gynecology). November 21, 2008.

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