Osteoporosis

What Is Osteoporosis?

Osteoporosis is a disease that causes bone loss, which can lead to weak bones. Weak bones can easily break. These breaks, sometimes called fractures, can be painful and make it hard to take care of yourself. The risk for osteoporosis increases with age. It is more common in women, especially after menopause. Other risk factors include:

- Smoking
- Drinking large amounts of alcohol
- Eating a low-calcium diet
- Being inactive or underweight
- Taking steroid medicines
- Having a small body frame
- Family history

What Are the Warning Signs of Osteoporosis?

Osteoporosis usually develops slowly. The first sign is often a bone fracture after bumping into something or having a minor fall. Another common sign is back pain that does not go away. This pain is from small fractures in the bones of the back. In people with osteoporosis, these bones may break even without a fall or injury.

How Is Osteoporosis Diagnosed?

Your doctor may order a test to measure bone mineral density (BMD). This test uses a special X-ray machine, called DEXA, to take pictures of your bones and measure how strong they are. If you are 50 years or older and have fractured a bone after a minor injury, your doctor may diagnose you with osteoporosis without testing your BMD.

How Is Osteoporosis Treated?

- Your doctor may suggest medicines called bisphosphonates to slow bone loss and reduce the risk for broken bones.
- Following a healthy lifestyle and eating a diet rich in calcium and vitamin D can help to keep your bones strong. Foods rich in calcium and vitamin D can include leafy green vegetables, dairy products, seafood, and soybeans. Your doctor might suggest taking calcium or vitamin D supplements.
- Your doctor may suggest special exercises and balance training.
- It is important to reduce your risk for falling and other common injuries. Check your home for areas where you could slip or fall. Some ways to make your home safer may be to:
  - Clean up clutter
  - Remove throw rugs
  - Use nonskid mats in the bathroom
  - Use nightlights

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? Questions for My Doctor

- What can I do to strengthen my bones?
- Should I be tested for osteoporosis?
- Do I need special medicines?
- What can I do to prevent osteoporosis from getting worse?
- Should I take calcium or vitamin D supplements?
- What can I do in my home to prevent me from falling?
- Will I have osteoporosis forever?
- Can I reverse my osteoporosis?

✓ Bottom Line

- Osteoporosis is a disease that causes bone loss, making your bones weak and more likely to break.
- The first sign is often a bone fracture after a minor fall.
- Osteoporosis may be diagnosed after special X-rays to measure the strength of bones. Your doctor may order other tests or diagnose osteoporosis based on symptoms.
- Your doctor may prescribe medicine to slow bone loss. Strengthening exercises and a healthy diet can also be helpful for people with osteoporosis.
- It is important to prevent falls and accidents by checking your home for places you may slip or fall.

For More Information

- **ACP:** www.acponline.org/patient_ed/rheumatology
- **Medline Plus:** www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/osteoporosis.html
- **National Osteoporosis Foundation:** www.nof.org/learn

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