

Q. Osteoporosis is a big problem for women, but shouldn't men be concerned too?

A. Yes. It's true that women, especially after menopause, lose bone calcium faster than men, creating more of a "porous bone" (osteoporosis) problem. Roughly 25% of women over the age of 60 will suffer from bone thinning. But around 12% of men over the age of 50 will have an osteoporosis-related bone fracture in their life. Osteoporosis in men often goes unrecognized, and much less research has been done on this disease in men.

Osteoporosis is a disease that gradually weakens bones, and can lead to fractures of the vertebrae, which in turn leads to stooped posture, loss of height, and compression of the lungs and stomach. People who are the most vulnerable for hip fractures are people over the age of 65, women, people with fair skin, small bones and a slender body, smokers and alcohol drinkers, people with Alzheimer's and people who don't get enough calcium in their diet.

The number of Americans who suffer a hip fracture is expected to reach 1.5 million this year. One in four people who suffer a hip fracture die within the same year because of complications during the recovery period. But osteoporosis is a financial problem as well because hip fractures can cost an average of \$35,000 in medical bills and lost income. Americans will pay \$14 billion this year on osteoporosis-related medical care.

Q. How is bone loss treated?

A. The best response is to try to prevent bone loss years before you become susceptible to the disease. Once bone is lost, it is hard to replace. The National Osteoporosis Foundation recommends a four part approach to prevention: 1) a balanced diet rich in calcium and vitamin D 2) weight bearing exercise 3) no smoking or excessive drinking 4) having a bone density test and taking medications if necessary.

Health care professionals suggest that most people need between 1000 and 1300 milligrams a day of calcium. We also need between 400 and 800 IU daily of vitamin D to help absorb the calcium. Sunlight on your skin gives you vitamin D, as well as vitamin-fortified dairy milk, egg yolks, salt-water fish, and liver. The best form of exercise to prevent bone loss is walking, dancing, jogging, climbing stairs or hiking.

For women, there are at least five widely-used medications that slow down the dissolving of bone tissue, and increase bone density. Estrogen replacement is another way to increase bone density in the spine and hip areas. This is often balanced with hormone replacements.

The only way to diagnose osteoporosis is with a bone mineral density test. This painless and accurate test measures your bone mass.

Other good resources for elders and their caregivers can be found on the internet at www.nof.org, or by calling the National Osteoporosis Foundation at 202-223-2226. Call 1-800-824-BONES for fall prevention advice.

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