

What is osteoporosis?

Osteoporosis is a common problem in older women. It is a condition in which bones become porous and weaker than normal, and may break easily. Fractures are more common in women with osteoporosis, including hip, vertebrae (spinal) and wrist fractures.

Women and people age 65 and older are most at risk of developing osteoporosis. Asian and Caucasian women and those in early menopause have a higher risk of osteoporosis, as do women with a small body frame. Other risk factors include smoking, inadequate calcium intake, excessive alcohol use, inactivity, over active thyroid and the long-term use of certain medications.

How much calcium do I need?

It varies. It is best to prevent osteoporosis before it starts by getting enough calcium and vitamin D (from sun exposure, food or supplements), and exercising regularly. The average American diet contains about 300 to 500 mg of calcium daily. However, teenage girls need 1300 mg of calcium daily. Women ages 19 to 50 should get 1000 mg of calcium daily; this dose should be increased to 1200 mg after age 50. The usual recommended daily amount of vitamin D is 400 international units. Exercise that helps build muscle, such as walking, climbing stairs, jogging or weight-lifting, may help prevent osteoporosis by preserving normal bone strength.

How do I know if I have osteoporosis?

Women can find out whether or not they have osteoporosis by taking a simple screening test or X-ray exam to measure bone strength (called a DEXA scan).

When should I get a DEXA scan?

All women age 65 and older should have a DEXA scan. Women may have the screen performed earlier if they go through early menopause, have repeat bone fractures or loose more than two inches of height. Men should also be screened if they have risk factors for osteoporosis. It may be helpful to have a follow-up test every three to five years, but this is not necessary in order to treat osteoporosis.

Are there treatments for osteoporosis?

Yes. There are many medications available that can decrease the risk of bone fractures caused by osteoporosis within the first three years of taking the medication. All of the medications work best when they are taken with enough calcium and vitamin D. However, some health insurance companies do not cover the cost of these medicines. Other treatments may be effective, such as the use of estrogen, but carry risks that do not take them the best treatment option. In addition, hip pads can be worn under clothing and can lower the risk of hip fracture by up to 80 percent and lower the risk of pelvic fractures in older adults. Hip pads cost about \$80 and can be purchased at medical supply stores or online. If your bone density is not normal or you think you have osteoporosis, ask your health care provider what the best treatment would be for you.