

SpineFAQs

Osteoporosis

What is Osteoporosis?

Osteoporosis is a disease where there is accelerated loss of bone calcium.

Why is Osteoporosis a problem?

The biggest risk from Osteoporosis is that as bones lose calcium, they become brittle and are much more likely to fracture with a minor injury such as a fall. The bone also has more problems healing after a fracture has occurred. About 700,000 fractures of the spine are diagnosed each year that are caused by osteoporosis. Osteoporosis is also a major factor in most hip and wrist fractures. All of these fractures contribute to large loss of function, pain, and many dollars spent to care for the patients. In addition, because so many of these fractures take many months to heal, these patients are at much higher risk of developing other complications such as blood clots, skin breakdown, pneumonia, and loss of the ability to be independent.

Who is at risk for Osteoporosis?

Women who have gone through menopause are the most common people at risk for osteoporosis. This is especially true in women who do not take estrogen supplements like Premarin. This is because the hormone estrogen; which helps regulate bone calcium, is no longer produced, and loss of bone calcium increases. People who do not get enough calcium in the diet (from milk and milk products), smokers, those who don't get much exercise, people on thyroid medications, and people taking Dilantin or steroid medicines are also at increased risk of osteoporosis. Finally, there is an increased risk in those people who have a strong family history of osteoporosis.

How do I know if I have Osteoporosis?

We now have very accurate tests available for measuring the bone density. The most widely used test is dual-energy x-ray absorptiometry (also known as DEXA).

What is DEXA?

This test uses x-rays to measure how strong the bones are. It is very accurate. It is a simple test which can be performed in an office. It takes about 15-20 minutes to do, and the results are available very soon after the scan is done.

What about treatment for Osteoporosis?

Fortunately, we understand osteoporosis much better now. Estrogen replacement therapy should be considered in all postmenopausal women. We also know that calcium supplements are important, and most women should take from 1200 to 1500 milligrams of calcium a day. Vitamin D should also be supplemented – taking between 400 and 800 IU. There are many foods which provide calcium, as well as a variety of supplements in pill form. Calcium supplementation does NOT replace bone calcium. It merely provides the body an alternate source so that it does not need to use as much calcium from the bones. Vitamin D helps you to absorb calcium.

An active lifestyle is also important – weightbearing exercise (walking etc) and strength training help make the bones strong. Finally, there are now medications available which can help make the bones stronger. Some of these include Fosamax, Boniva, Actonel and Forteo. Ask your primary doctor or OB-GYN for more information about these medications and osteoporosis treatment.

For more information go to:

The National Osteoporosis Foundation www.nof.org

The Arthritis Foundation www.arthritis.org

The American College of Rheumatology www.rheumatology.org