Health Basics

Osteoporosis

What is osteoporosis?
A complex disease, about 54 million Americans currently have osteoporosis. Osteoporosis is characterized by fragile bones which are more likely to break. Typically, without treatment, those with osteoporosis are at risk for fractures of the hip, spine and wrist, although any bone can be affected.

What are they symptoms of osteoporosis?
Symptoms of osteoporosis include:

- Back pain, caused by a fractured or collapsed vertebra
- Loss of height over time
- A stooped posture
- A bone fracture that occurs much more easily than expected

What are the risk factors for osteoporosis?

- You’re female (although men also get osteoporosis)
- You’re older (The older you get, the greater your risk of osteoporosis.)
- Genetics (Are you small and thin? Do you have a family history of osteoporosis?)
- Ethnicity (You’re at greatest risk of osteoporosis if you’re white or of Asian descent.)
- You have a history of broken bones
- You have a low level of sex hormones
- Diets low in calcium and vitamin D intake and high in protein, sodium and caffeine
- Sedentary lifestyle
- Smoking
- Alcohol abuse
- Use of certain medicines, such as steroid medications and some anticonvulsants, among others

- Certain diseases and conditions, such as anorexia nervosa, rheumatoid arthritis and gastrointestinal diseases, among others

These are the major risk factors, but speak to your doctor, too, as you may have additional ones not listed here.

What is the testing procedure for osteoporosis?
To diagnose osteoporosis and assess your risk of fracture and determine your need for treatment, your doctor will most likely order a bone density scan. A bone density scan measures bone mineral density. It is most commonly performed using dual-energy x-ray absorptiometry (DXA or DEXA) or bone densitometry. The DXA test finds levels of bone density in various parts of a person's body and then reveals a certain number.

The number is compared to other bone density levels of people who are the same age, race and body size. If a person's levels are more than 2.5 standard deviations (also known as a T-score) below the average, then they are classified as having osteoporosis.

How is osteoporosis treated?
The following treatment options are recommended as effective ways to treat osteoporosis:

- Medication, such as bisphosphonate
- Hormone-related therapy
- Weight-bearing exercise
- Daily vitamin supplementation with 1,200 mg of calcium and 800-1,000 International Units (IU) of vitamin D for those 50 and older.

Speak to your doctor about which treatment option or combination of treatment options might work best for you. In addition, visit the National Osteoporosis Foundation at www.nof.org for more information and educational materials on the causes, prevention, detection and treatment of osteoporosis.

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