

Dryden Family Medicine

Family Practice, and Preventive Care

Osteoporosis (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

What is osteoporosis? — Osteoporosis is a disease that makes your bones weak. People with the disease can break their bones too easily. For instance, people with osteoporosis sometimes break a bone after falling down at home.

Breaking a bone can be serious, especially if the bone is in the hip. People who break a hip sometimes lose the ability to walk on their own. Many of them end up in a nursing home. That's why it is so important to avoid breaking a bone in the first place.

How do I know if I have osteoporosis? — Osteoporosis does not cause symptoms until you break a bone. But your doctor or nurse can have you tested for it. The best test is a bone density test called the "DXA test." It is a special kind of X-ray.

Experts recommend bone density testing for women older than 65. That is because women in this age group have the highest risk of osteoporosis. Still, other people should sometimes be tested, too. Ask your doctor or nurse if you should be tested.

Some people learn that they have osteoporosis because they break a bone during a fall or a mild impact. This is called a "fragility fracture," because people with healthy bones should not break a bone that easily. People who have fragility fractures are at high risk of having other bones break.

What can I do to keep my bones as healthy as possible? — You can:

Eat foods with a lot of calcium, such as milk, yogurt, and green leafy vegetables (table 1 and figure 1)

Eat foods with a lot of vitamin D, such as milk that has vitamin D added, and fish from the ocean
Take calcium and vitamin D pills
Be active for at least 30 minutes, most days of the week
Avoid smoking
Limit the amount of alcohol you drink to 1 to 2 drinks a day at most
Do your best to keep from falling, too — It sounds simple, but you can prevent a lot of fractures by reducing the chances of a fall. To do that:

Make sure all your rugs have a no-slip backing to keep them in place
Tuck away any electrical cords, so they are not in your way
Light all walkways well
Watch out for slippery floors
Wear sturdy, comfortable shoes with rubber soles
Have your eyes checked
Ask your doctor or nurse to check whether any of your medicines might make you dizzy or increase your risk of falling
Can osteoporosis be treated? — Yes, there are a few medicines to treat osteoporosis. These medicines can reduce the chances that you will break a bone.

Doctors and nurses usually suggest trying medicines called bisphosphonates first. If those medicines do not do enough or if they cause side effects that you cannot stand, there are other medicines to try.

How will I know the treatment is working? — Doctors and nurses often order bone density tests to check if osteoporosis medicines are working. These are the same tests they use to find osteoporosis in the first place. Sometimes a blood or urine test is also needed.