

5 things to know about bone health as you age



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A strong skeleton helps keep you vital. Here's how to prevent bone loss at any age.

The word "[osteoporosis](#)" may call to mind a stooped-over granny with a cane. But bone loss starts long before the granny (or grandpappy) years — in fact, it's been happening for much of your life. Like many aspects of aging, bone loss takes a long time to become a problem, as it silently gets worse and worse. Then, one day, you notice you're shorter than you used to be, or a simple misstep results in a broken bone.

The good news is that bone loss doesn't have to become a problem, says endocrinologist [Natalie E. Cusano, MD, MS](#), a member of Northwell's [Katz Institute for Women's Health](#). "Today, we have tests and treatments that let us diagnose and stall bone loss in women and men," she says.

"And we know which lifestyle changes will actually help prevent bone loss."

Here are five things to know about bone loss — and simple steps to take to keep your bones strong.

1. Bone loss — osteopenia — is happening right now

Don't let their hardness fool you: Bones are living tissue made up of protein, collagen and minerals like calcium. Throughout your life, a natural process called bone remodeling has been continuously breaking down and replacing every bone in your body. "Our entire skeletons are completely replaced or remodeled every 11 years, more or less," says Dr. Cusano.

But the balance between building up and breaking down gradually shifts. Bone mass peaks in young adulthood; for most people, that's when it begins a slow decline.

Osteopenia vs. osteoporosis

Eventually, as bone loss accelerates and bone rebuilding slows, it's possible to develop a condition called osteopenia, or low bone density — your bones don't have the mineral content they used to.

If osteopenia isn't caught and treated, it can turn into osteoporosis.

- **Osteopenia** is when your bone density is lower than normal for your age but has not progressed to osteoporosis yet. Think of it as a warning sign.
- **Osteoporosis** is a more severe disease where the internal structure of your bones becomes porous, putting you at a high risk of fracture — even from a [minor fall](#).

Between the two conditions, half of all Americans over 50 are at significantly increased risk of breaking a bone.

2. Weakened bones can be deadly

When you're young, breaking a bone isn't that big a deal — in most cases, you wear a cast for a while, possibly do some physical therapy, and move on with your life. But the situation is different if you suffer a fracture because your bones are weak.

How significant can a simple fracture be? American women 50 years and older have a 2.8% increased risk of death following a hip fracture. That matches a woman's risk of dying from breast cancer — and it's four times higher than her risk of dying from endometrial cancer.

"Bone loss is a very serious issue," Dr. Cusano says. A fracture isn't necessarily deadly — it's the complications. As you get older, [anything that makes you less active](#) can spiral into other health problems. "Even something like a wrist fracture, if it's in your dominant hand, can have a large impact," she says. And breaking a hip much more dramatically reduces a person's mobility, which leaves them weaker overall and more susceptible to blood clots and dangerous illnesses and infections.

Of the 300,000 people who suffer hip fractures in the U.S. annually, around 75,000 will die within a year. Another 75,000 have to move into a nursing home.

3. Men suffer from bone loss, too

Much of the focus is on women when it comes to decreased bone density. And rightly so: Nearly 80% of osteoporosis cases in the U.S. are in women. That might be why men are less likely to be evaluated for the condition after a fracture. But one in four men over age 50 will break a bone due to osteoporosis — they're more likely to break a hip than they are to get prostate cancer. And men who have major fractures, like in their hip, are more likely than women to suffer a fatal complication.

4. A DEXA scan — bone density test — can help you manage your fracture risk

Osteoporosis is called a silent disease because its first symptom is often a broken bone. But a screening test can show you where you stand when it comes to bone density. The test is called dual X-ray absorptiometry: [DEXA](#) or DXA for short. In just a few minutes, the low-radiation scan passes high- and low-energy X-ray beams through your body, usually focusing on the hips and spine. Doctors use the scan to measure the strength and mineral content of your bones.

The DXA test result is known as a T-score, with zero as the baseline. The more negative the number gets, the weaker your bones are — and the more likely you are to suffer a fracture. A score between -1 and -2.4 means you have osteopenia; at or below -2.5 means you have osteoporosis. And with each one-point drop in your T-score, your risk of breaking a bone roughly doubles. Another test, called FRAX, is often performed alongside DXA. FRAX estimates your risk of breaking a hip or other major bone within the next decade.

The Bone Health and Osteoporosis Foundation recommends DXA screening for women ages 65 and up, for men aged 70 and up and for anyone over 50 with additional risk factors.



5. Osteopenia and osteoporosis are treatable

You can't cure bone loss, but medication can help slow or even stop it. Your doctor may prescribe one of several options to strengthen your bones and reduce your risk of fracture. Antiresorptive drugs (like alendronate, AKA Fosamax) slow or stop the breakdown of bones, while anabolics (such as teriparatide and others) stimulate your body to build more bone. As with any medication, you may experience some side effects. Unless they interfere with your daily activities, Dr. Cusano says it's worth it. "There are risks and benefits to everything that we do," Dr. Cusano says. "But when you have osteoporosis, the benefit of starting a medication to lower fracture risk greatly outweighs the risks."



Simple steps to protect your bone health

Don't wait for your bones to get weaker. No matter your age, these stay-strong steps can help:

Get more calcium and vitamin D from your diet

"Making sure you get enough calcium and vitamin D is always important," says Dr. Cusano.

"Every cell in your body is constantly using calcium, and if you don't have enough, your body takes calcium from your bones."

- **Calcium:** All adults should aim for at least 1,000 mg of calcium every day; women over 50 and men over 70 need 1,200 mg daily. The best sources are dairy products like milk and yogurt, but if you're dairy-free, many alternative milks now have calcium added. Other options include kale, tofu and small fish with bones like sardines and canned salmon.
- **Vitamin D:** Adults should get 15 mcg (600 IU) per day. After age 70, that goes up to 20 mcg (800 IU). It's tricky to get enough of this vitamin through diet alone — the list of foods that provide it is short. But many dairy products, cereals and orange juices are fortified. And because sunlight's ultraviolet rays interact with the skin to produce vitamin D, even 15 minutes of sun might give you a little boost.

Schedule weight-bearing exercise

Weight-bearing workouts exert force on your bones, which triggers bone-building cells to get busy. Easy, effective options include walking, jogging, racket sports and stairclimbing. Strength training builds muscle, which helps support your bones. Try free weights or weight machines, resistance bands or even your own body weight (think pushups).

Maintain a healthy lifestyle

Smoking and heavy drinking have been shown to weaken bones. So, if you smoke, now is the perfect time to quit. And if you average three or more alcoholic beverages a day, scale back.

