

live well, work well

Health and wellness tips for your work, home and life—brought to you by the insurance and healthcare specialists at M3.

Osteoporosis

Osteoporosis is not just a women's disease. Men also suffer from it, although not as frequently.

With more than 40 million Americans at increased risk for low bone mass and osteoporosis (which means “porous bones”), it's good to know that osteoporosis is a preventable and treatable disease. Learn the risk factors for osteoporosis, and what you can do to keep your bones strong and healthy.

What Causes Osteoporosis?

The strength of your bones depends on both their mass and density. Bone density depends in part on the amount of calcium, phosphorous and other minerals they have. When your bones contain less minerals, their strength decreases and they lose their internal supporting structure.

Bone is continuously changing; new bone is made and old bone is broken down in a process called remodeling, or bone turnover. A full cycle of bone remodeling takes two to three months. When you are young, your body makes new bone faster than it breaks down old bone, thus increasing bone mass. You reach your peak bone mass in your mid-30s. Thereafter, you lose slightly more than you gain. Not getting enough vitamin D and calcium can accelerate the process. At menopause, when estrogen levels drop, bone loss in women increases to approximately 1 to 3 percent per year. Bone loss in men accelerates around age 65, and it's lost at the same rate as women. Your risk of developing osteoporosis depends on how much bone mass you attained between ages 25 and 35 and how rapidly you lose it later.

Three factors that are essential for keeping your bones healthy throughout your life include:

- Regular exercise

- Adequate amounts of dietary calcium
- Adequate amounts of vitamin D, which is essential for calcium absorption

Signs and Symptoms

Osteoporosis usually develops over many years and without symptoms. The first signs of it commonly occur during the middle and older adult years and include:

- Getting shorter in height
- Developing a curved upper back
- Continuing back pain
- Fracturing of the bones (the bones that are most commonly broken are the small bones in the spine, hip and wrist).

Treatment

If you are diagnosed with osteoporosis, you will be required to make sure your diet contains sufficient calcium and vitamin D, as well as exercise regularly and take medication to reduce bone loss and increase bone thickness.

Prevention

The process of bone thinning is a natural part of aging and cannot be completely stopped. However, osteoporosis can be reduced or delayed through the practice of healthy lifestyle habits. Studies show that exercising during the preteen and teen years increases bone mass and greatly reduces the risk of osteoporosis in adulthood.

For more information, visit the National Osteoporosis Foundation (NOF) at www.nof.org.