

Osteopenia and osteoporosis: what to know

That loose stepping stone in the garden was just waiting for you to trip on it and break your hip. Now, your health care provider says you have something called osteopenia. The good news? Knowing you have osteopenia may mean that you can prevent osteoporosis, a more serious bone disease.

Bone strength is measured by the amount of bone mass or bone mineral density (BMD). While osteopenia is a mild reduction in BMD, the reduction is more severe with osteoporosis. Osteopenia is a “pre-disease” warning that you may develop osteoporosis, which is marked by brittle, weak bones that can break easily.

Women may be hit hardest

Everyone loses some bone mass as they age. This is because bones naturally break down and do not re-form as they once did. If you are a woman who is white or Asian,

older, small and thin, you may be at a higher risk for osteoporosis. It also tends to run in families.

Poor nutrition (especially too little vitamin D, calcium and phosphorus), lack of physical activity, smoking and excessive alcohol can reduce BMD. So can rheumatoid arthritis, diabetes and Parkinson’s disease.

Why tests are vital

There are no outward signs of osteoporosis. In order to diagnose osteoporosis, you get a bone density test. It is similar to an X-ray. The most common test is dual-energy X-ray absorptiometry (DXA). It measures your bone density and compares it with the peak bone health of a 30-year-old, giving you a T-score. Since this comparison may not apply to everyone, you may get a Z-score, which looks at results in relation to averages for people your age.

A single bone density test may not be enough. Review your bone density tests with your health care provider to see the rate of bone loss over time. Men and women should talk with their health care provider about concerns and risk factors for osteopenia and osteoporosis.

Steps that can help

Your T-score or Z-score can improve if you take steps toward healthier bones. Here are some actions that can help:

- Talk with your health care provider about your bone health. He or she can tell you how a healthy weight and balanced diet will help.
- Get plenty of calcium from dairy products, leafy green vegetables or calcium-fortified foods. Some women may also require calcium supplements.
- Get enough vitamin D from your diet and from sunlight. Too much sunlight may be harmful to your skin, so you may want to consult your health care provider about how much sunlight is enough for you.
- To strengthen bones, do weight-bearing physical activities, like strength training, brisk walking or running, several days a week.
- If you smoke, quit.

Do not wait until you find out you have osteopenia or osteoporosis before you care for your bones. The healthier your bones are now, the fewer problems you may face later.

